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**Students' Perception of the Transition from an Early College High
School to a University**

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**Students' Perception of the Transition from an Early College High
School to a University**

by

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Dedication

To my father, Ramon Perez

(March 7, 1956 – November 7, 1994)

You started me on this journey 30 years ago, buying me a breakfast cupcake before dropping me off at school. I never stopped going to school – or eating cupcakes.

Your love and sacrifices made this possible.

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Students' Perception of the Transition from an Early College High School to a University

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Early college high schools (ECHSs) are secondary institutions designed to aid students with the transition from high school to college and reduce the achievement gap for minority, low-income, and first-generation students (Early College High School Initiative, 2008; The Council of State Governments, 2009). Most ECHS research is quantitative and focused on student enrollment, academic success, and matriculation to college. Factors that influence the student transition from high school to college have not been examined (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010). This study more closely examines gaps in research by exploring how both formal and informal mechanisms of support help ECHS graduates with their adjustment to college life. Utilizing a transition framework, this exploratory study responds to four major research questions: (1) To what degree did the support students receive while enrolled in an ECHS aid in their transition from high school to college? (2) In what ways did students feel prepared or not prepared for their experiences in college? (3) What aspects of the transition did students find most and least challenging? (4) What components of support provided students with an understanding of

what they would experience once enrolled in college? A qualitative case study format was used, and participants interviewed were ECHS graduates who recently completed the first year at a four-year institution. Through their interviews, the participants revealed they received a significant amount of academic support that helped them with their transition to a four-year institution, but were lacking in the support and knowledge they needed to negotiate their personal and social transition. The results suggest potential new directions for research focused on the transition from ECHSs to four-year institutions and for the type and quality of support students who participate in accelerated learning experiences like the ECHS receive once they begin their studies at a four-year institution.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As students make the transition from secondary to post-secondary education, the academic, social, and emotional rigors they confront highlight the importance of support structures located in the post-secondary environment, and the need for guidance prior to matriculation. Research has been conducted on this crucial time in a student's life, with particular focus on the elements of academic and non-academic support provided to students during their first year of college (Grayson, 2003; Smith & Zhang, 2009). Specifically, orientation, advising, counseling, tutoring, and mentoring can address some of the academic difficulties students face as they navigate through their first year of college coursework. Non-academically, students who participate in co-curricular activities and leadership opportunities, live on-campus, and utilize peer support programs find the social and emotional support necessary for student success (Kinzie, Kuh, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Students benefit from the interactions they have with other students, staff, and administrators while utilizing academic and non-academic support and, as a result, are more likely to be retained beyond their first year of college (Upcraft, 1989).

While academic and non-academic forms of support are especially critical in a student's first year of study in a university setting, other factors or student characteristics also affect how a student will fare in that environment. Noel and Levitz (1990) and Adelman (2006) identify "academic underpreparedness" as a factor that can hinder student success or persistence in college. Students receive various types of support at the secondary level to help them with the adjustment to the academic rigors of college and to

smooth the transition from high school-level coursework to college-level coursework. Advanced placement (AP) and dual or concurrent enrollment courses are examples of the secondary school effort to offer the kind of academic pace found in a college environment (Fowler & Luna, 2009; Hallett, 2011; Karp, 2004). AP courses offer students the opportunity to enroll in advanced coursework in preparation for an exam that, when passed, offers college credit. Dual or concurrent enrollment provides students the opportunity to complete college coursework while in high school (Hoffman et al., 2009; Kleiner & Lewis, 2005). While an increasing number of students are using these college-credit granting programs, the programs are still not easily accessible or used by certain populations of students. Specifically, Thompson and Rust (2007) report that approximately 40% of high schools offer AP courses. And these courses are taught at a pace and with a rigor that present academic challenges for many students. Consequently, they do not enroll in AP courses.

Dual/concurrent enrollment courses are intended for students who not likely to enroll or succeed in AP courses. In recent studies, students, particularly low-income, first-generation college students have benefited from dual/concurrent enrollment. These students were more academically prepared and persisted after the first semester of the first year in college (Hoffman et al., 2009). Also, dual/concurrent enrollment courses require secondary and post-secondary institutions to work collaboratively, promoting curriculum alignment, increasing student enrollment and retention rates, and providing a cost-saving to both high schools and post-secondary institutions (Kisker, 2006).

Increased retention rates and the student and institutional financial advantages of high school to college transition opportunities such as AP courses and dual/concurrent enrollment, have encouraged secondary and post-secondary institutions to explore and develop additional collaborative programs and structures (Karp, Bailey, & Fermin, 2004; McDonald & Farrell, 2012). Specifically, Early college high schools (ECHSs), while not a new concept, have experienced a resurgence within the past decade and have provided institutions with another form of support for students making the transition from high school to college.

ECHSs were developed to ease students' academic transition from high school to college. A nationwide initiative, ECHSs are based on the idea that "every young person needs a postsecondary credential to thrive in today's world." According to this vision, ECHSs combine secondary and post-secondary curricula, environments, and pedagogical practices to remove the "financial, academic, and psychological hurdles" that prevent students from pursuing and/or completing post-secondary studies (Early College High School Initiative, 2008; Wolk, 2005). This vision articulates the purpose and means by which underserved students can attain a post-secondary degree and identifies specific obstacles or "hurdles" that prohibit student enrollment and persistence in higher education institutions. In addition to this vision, ECHSs are expected to adhere to a set of five principles (Early College High School Initiative, 2008):

Core principle one: Early college schools are committed to serving students underrepresented in higher education.

Core principle two: Early college schools are created and sustained by a local education agency, a higher education institution, and the community, all of whom are jointly accountable for student success.

Core principle three: Early college schools and their higher education partners and community jointly develop an integrated academic program so all students earn one to two years of transferable college credit leading to college completion.

Core principle four: Early college schools engage students in a comprehensive support system that develops academic and social skills as well as the behaviors and conditions necessary for college completion.

Core principle five: Early college schools and their higher education and community partners work with intermediaries to create conditions and advocate for supportive policies that advance the early college movement.

These principles set expectations for the development and functions of ECHSs that center on secondary institution and post-secondary institution partnerships and institution and community partnerships. Also articulated in these principles, is the expectation that ECHSs will create support structures that encourage the academic and social growth of students in advance of their entrance into a post-secondary environment. Berger, Adelman, and Cole (2010) confirm that ECHSs that adhere to these principles are more likely to improve the student experience and ensure that students graduate and enroll in post-secondary institutions.

The Early college high school initiative (ECHSI) and Jobs for the future have published reports that confirm the positive effects of ECHSs that were established in the past decade (Early College High School Initiative, 2010; Jobs for the Future, 2011; Jobs for the Future, 2014). These reports indicate that ECHS students perform well academically and are more likely to go to college upon graduation from their secondary

institution. These reports also indicate that ECHSs primarily serve economically disadvantaged students and have helped in reducing the difference in levels of achievement between these students and their more affluent peers. Research, however, is still limited and a closer exploration of the factors that make ECHSs effective is necessary (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Valadez, 2013). Institutions report data on student academic performance, but the study of these students and their experience during the transition to college has been lacking. Recommendations for further research on ECHSs center on what specific factors of the student experience (particularly in relation to support structures articulated in core principle four) help or do not help students as they adjust to college in their first year (Berger et al., 2010; Berger et al., 2013; Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010). This core principle requires that schools put academic and social support structures in place that will assist students in their transition to college.

Limited information regarding this particular principle is available, and most of the research is anecdotal, with small groups of students being interviewed for their perceptions of the support they received while in an ECHS and how that support helped or did not help them in their adjustment to college life (Nodine, 2009; Valadez, 2013). The focus of previous research also remains primarily academic with little exploration of how the supports available in ECHSs help students cope with non-academic factors in the transition from high school to college (Williams, 2010).

This chapter describes and discusses the type of support provided to ECHS students and outlines a study that explored how those non-academic supports assisted

students with their transition to college. The chapter further outlines the problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, methodology overview, terminology, delimitations and limitations, assumptions, significance, and a chapter summary.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

ECHSs offer students the unique opportunity to simultaneously receive a secondary and post-secondary education, a hybrid model that is intended to help students with the transition to college (Kazis, 2006; Valadez, 2013). While various aspects of the ECHS experience have been examined by researchers (e.g. students' perceptions of support and faculty/administrator/student perceptions of running a successful ECHS), no research examines ECHS graduates' transition to the post-secondary environment (Smith & Zhang, 2009; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). Specifically, factors that influence these students' transition to college and how they have been prepared to cope with this change have been largely ignored. Exploring and more closely examining the effects of ECHS enrollment on students as they matriculate to an exclusively post-secondary environment is critical for understanding the effectiveness of the ECHSI.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

ECHSs are increasing in number and are one of the most recently developed vehicles used to improve students' access to higher education and to assist students with the challenging adjustment to the rigors of college life. In 2001, the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI) was founded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Hoffman et al., 2009). The initiative combines secondary and post-secondary

curriculum and environments, as well as emphasizes “challenge” over “remediation” as the most effective way to make a difference in the academic success of students who may not otherwise enroll at or succeed in higher education institutions.

By the 2013-2014 school year, the ECHS initiative established 280 ECHSs in 32 states with the help of 13 partner organizations in addition to the Gates Foundation (Jobs for the Future, 2014). While these institutions vary in offerings, they have some basic, common characteristics and provide similar services and opportunities. ECHSs are hybrid institutions. Students have access to both “typical” high school activities such as “clubs, a yearbook, a prom, and student trips” and activities and resources generally found on college campuses (Chmelynski, 2004). The ECHSI is a different direction than AP or Dual/Concurrent Enrollment because of its effort to push under-resourced students into a more challenging curriculum rather than assisting students already identified as high-achievers, who benefit more from dual/concurrent enrollment and Advanced Placement courses. ECHSs primarily target students who are first-generation college students, low-income, and minorities. Each of these groups may not be served well by other forms academic support (Valadez, 2013).

The expectation of college attainment and the academic and social support and encouragement students receive are critical to the success of the students enrolled in ECHSs (Valadez, 2013). With data indicating that students from ECHSs are more likely to attend college and be retained, exploring factors that support and increase student retention can provide foundation for the establishment of more ECHSs and appropriate

methods and practice for higher education administrators (Early College High School Initiative, 2010). The students receive substantial academic support throughout high school, and to an extent, receive some social and emotional support. However, Williams (2010) found that students enrolled in programs designed to provide them with support to ease the academic and social transition into college while granting college credit did not perform better academically than students entering college with no college credit.

Learning about the experience of ECHS students in relation to their social, emotional, academic transition to college may be helpful in better understanding the effectiveness of the support structures provided by ECHSs. This study is exploratory, and examines the experiences of ECHS students in their first year after graduation from an ECHS and their' perceptions of the transition support they received while enrolled in an ECHS and how that support did or did not help them during their transition to college life.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions centered on the student experience, asking students for their perceptions of the support they received, how it was structured, to what degree they utilized the support, and how they feel it has been helpful to them in their first semester of college. The questions specifically examined were:

Research question one: To what degree did the support students receive while enrolled in an ECHS aid in their transition from high school to college?

Research question two: In what ways did students feel prepared or not prepared for their experiences in college?

Research question three: What aspects of the transition to college did students find most and least challenging?

Research question four: What components of the support structures provided students with an effective understanding of what they would experience once enrolled in college?

This research provided additional knowledge about the effectiveness of ECHSs and whether or not the support students receive while enrolled helped with their transition to a post-secondary environment.

OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study focused on one ECHS and identifies graduates who have matriculated to a four-year institution. Participants were interviewed about their experience in an ECHS and specifically about how that experience provided them with support for the transition to college. To answer these research questions, qualitative data were gathered from ECHS graduates currently enrolled in higher education institutions. Participants were graduates from an ECHS that has shown high success rates for students' matriculation to college.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Specific terminology and concepts were used in this study to discuss the transition from secondary to post-secondary education for ECHS graduates. This section provides definitions and context for these terms and concepts.

Early College High School (ECHS)

Students enrolled in Early college high schools (ECHSs) were the focus of this study. While the ECHS format varies, the primary definition of the ECHS is an institution, small in size, which offers high school and college-level coursework simultaneously. For the purpose of this study, the school was located on a four-year or community college campus. When students graduated from an ECHS, they will have either earned an associate's degree or two years of credit toward an undergraduate degree (Jobs for the Future, 2008). Some research refers to ECHSs as Early College Schools or ECSs. In the research reviewed, no differentiation has been made between ECHSs and ECSs (Berger et al., 2010). While these terms are used interchangeably, this study will refer to these institutions as Early College High Schools or ECHSs. Also related to the concept of the ECHS, is the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI).

Accelerated Learning

The term accelerated learning refers to an academic structure or program like ECHSs that integrate both college-level and high school-level courses for the benefit of “significant time saving” (Kisker, 2006). Accelerated learning also refers to dual/concurrent enrollment, in which students enroll in secondary and post-secondary courses simultaneously while in high school, and AP courses (Hoffman, 2009; Valadez, 2013; Lewis & Overman, 2008)). In this study, accelerated learning was a broad “umbrella” term that includes schools such as ECHSs, and programs such as concurrent/dual enrollment and AP courses and exams.

Student Support

The fourth of the early college core principles requires that ECHSs engage students in forms of support that will help those students with their academic and social development, promote “behaviors and conditions necessary for college completion,” and address any barriers that may prohibit academic success and college completion (Early College High School Initiative, 2008). While the ECHSI does not articulate specific programs and structures ECHSs should use to support students, Berger et al. (2010) identified structures at ECHSs designed to assist students with their academic and social development. Formal structures include seminars that enhance student literacy and research skills, tutoring, advising appointments with professional staff, and life skills workshops. ECHSs have also focused on support structures that provide students with more information regarding the transition to college, and specifically about applying to college, taking entrance exams and understanding more about the college environment through campus tours (Berger et al., 2010; Chemylinski, 2004).

The research reviewed for this study neither articulates the difference between academic support and non-academic support nor academic support and social support. Because the ECHSI core principles allow ECHSs to self-determine their academic and social support structures, the supports provided are not consistent or clearly identified. Also, based on this study, many of the support offerings blended the teaching of academic/learning skills, social skills, and personal management strategies. However, it is important to understand the different types of support students received, if those supports

were evenly emphasized, and how they affected students' adjustment to a four-year institution.

Academic Support

Based on information available, most of the support provided students by ECHSs centers on academic needs and transition services. For this study academic support is defined as ECHS-created structures that enhance student learning and academic skills.

Non-academic Support

Non-academic support will include ECHS-created structures that enhance and support student social skills and/or are created specifically to aid students with the transition to college life once graduated from an ECHS.

Transition

While elements of transition were discussed in depth in the literature review, in this study, the term transition referred to the period of time during which students adjust to college life and how they accomplish that adjustment. During the transition to college, students face a different set of social expectations as they adjust to college life. They are required to redefine themselves and others in addition to renegotiating relationships (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Cravey, 2013; Edmunds et al., 2013; Valadez et al., 2013). With this understanding, ECHSs have developed support structures to aid in student transition.

DELIMITATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This study included a set of criteria for participants and their educational experiences, and the number of participants was small, limiting generalizability of data.

Delimitations

This study focused on how elements of support provided by ECHSs help students with their transition to the post-secondary environment. The four participants graduated from the same ECHS, but attended different four-year institutions. The small size of the pool of students interviewed allowed for the gathering of in-depth and detailed information about transition supports provided at this ECHS. Interviewing a group of students who attended the same ECHS allowed for consistency in relation to their commentary on supports made available to them while a student at an ECHS. The students were interviewed at the end of their first year of college after graduating from an ECHS.

Limitations

While substantial quantitative research exists regarding ECHS students' academic success, there is limited research on non-academic, developmental factors contributing to student success. Methodologically, the small number of participants meant that the results could not be generalized to other institutions.

ASSUMPTIONS

This study made several assumptions regarding the participants, the ECHS from which they graduated and the post-secondary institutions in which they enrolled. The

students graduated from an ECHS and were enrolled at a post-secondary institution. By the point in time the students were interviewed regarding their perceptions of academic support, they completed one year of coursework. Students were able to share information regarding the transition to college life and expectations, and reflect on how supports provided by their ECHS aided them in that transition.

This study assumes that the ECHS in which these students were enrolled adhered to the core principles of the ECHSI and provided support for each student's transition to college. Specific structures of support were not assumed, nor were students' level of use of that support. In addition, this study assumes that the post-secondary institution in which the student was enrolled offered support for the transition to college, which may influence students' perceptions of the support they received while enrolled in an ECHS.

SIGNIFICANCE

The ultimate purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the experience of ECHS graduates as they made the transition to a four-year college or university. Further, this study examined the effects of the support these students received at the ECHS to aid with their transition to the first year of college. Extensive research has been conducted regarding ECHS students' academic performance and persistence in colleges and universities and completion of their undergraduate degrees (Berger et al., 2009). However, little formal research has been conducted to gain a nuanced understanding of the effects of both academic and non-academic support as it relates to their transition to and development in college.

This study provided some foundation for further research on the post-secondary academic success of ECHS graduates from a college student development perspective, a perspective that greatly informs how college-level student support services are developed and improved. For secondary education institutions, this study revealed insight on effective academic, non-academic and social supports, and identified areas of need for ECHS students, and offered a new pathway and focus for research on students who participate in ECHS programs and other forms of accelerated education.

As the number of accelerated education offerings increases, more students are experiencing college life in a different way, with some post-secondary experience, while still enrolled in a secondary institution. These students, in many cases are also attending college with extensive course credit, which means that they will graduate from college sooner. Research such as this, which explored factors of transition and examining critical points of student development, provides some direction for further research on the accelerated student experience and how student services can be better informed and structured to respond to this trend.

SUMMARY

Included in this chapter are the problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, overview of methodology, terminology, delimitations and limitations, assumptions, and the significance of the study. ECHSs have grown in number over the past decade and have been part of an accelerated learning movement that has altered how students make the transition from secondary education to post-secondary education.

Created with the purpose of improving the enrollment and graduation rates of students in at the post-secondary level, ECHSs offer students the unique experience of an institution that possesses the structure of a high school with the academic rigor of a university.

ECHSs also offer the additional assistance of support mechanisms that ensure success not only while enrolled in the ECHS but also when making the transition to college life at a post-secondary institution. However, these support structures have not been fully examined. This study focused primarily on the effectiveness of these support structures in relation to the ECHS student's transition to college. More specifically, the research explored students' perceptions of their level of preparation for the rigors of post-secondary education and in what ways those students were aided by ECHS efforts that supported their transition.

While research regarding the intersection of these two topics, ECHSs and transition, is limited, the next section of this study will more closely examine available information and major research on both ECHSs and concepts and theories of student transition. In addition, the literature review section will offer a critique of the research, both in content and method, suggesting future areas of research. Ultimately, the literature review will establish the foundation for the method of study and the theoretical framework from which the research will be conducted.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The number of Early college high schools (ECHSs) has increased significantly in the last decade (Jobs for the Future, 2010; Jobs for the Future, 2013). Serving as a bridge between high school and college, these schools offer a supportive and nurturing environment in which low-income and minority students can earn an Associate's degree, and course credit toward a Bachelor's degree (Arshavsky et al., 2010; Berger, Adelman, & Cole, 2010; Valadez, 2013). While interest in ECHSs as a method for improving the student transition to college is increasing, the research on this topic is limited. The research that does exist asserts the need for greater and more in-depth study of ECHSs and specifically, individual factors related to student success (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Nodine, 2009; Smith & Zhang, 2009).

Despite these limitations, this chapter examines and critiques available reports and publications about ECHSs and the concept of transition from high school to college. In doing so, this review provides the synthesis needed to identify a conceptual framework for this study.

RELEVANT RESEARCH AND LITERATURE

Interest in improving student matriculation from secondary to post-secondary education has increased in the past several years, with numerous stakeholders invested in the increased enrollment of the college-going population in institutions of higher education (Kazis, 2009; Kirst, 2004; Kuo, 2010; Pitre, 2011). This interest has spurred the desire for research on and the development and implementation of initiatives, such as

Early college high school initiative (ECHSI), which are designed to ensure students have the tools they need to make a successful transition to college.

Early College High Schools

ECHSs are one of a number of paths providing college-going students with an opportunity to earn credit prior to high school graduation. While these schools are recent developments, they are quickly increasing in number and are changing the relationship between secondary and post-secondary education (Chmelynski, 2004; Weldon, 2009). The need for a smoother transition into college and college-level academic work has encouraged secondary and post-secondary institutions to adapt and provide more opportunity for high school students to obtain college credit, and ultimately college degrees (Smith & Zhang, 2009). However, this view is not unique to ECHS and has existed for much longer.

Historical Foundations

During the 1930s and 1940s, educator Leonard Koos developed a plan to integrate secondary and post-secondary education, a move that would increase college enrollment and save both school districts and colleges numerous, and particularly financial, resources (Kisker, 2006; Koos, 1923). This plan would place students in grades 7 to 10 in high school and students in grades 11 to 14 in junior college. During this time period, institutions in several states, including California, Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri and Mississippi adopted what was known as the “6-4-4” plan. Psychologists and education researchers noted there was an assumed break in intellectual maturation

between grades 12 and 13. However, Koos (1923) viewed this break as artificial. Specifically, student growth was continuous, and the educational environment should respond to that continuous progress. The “6-4-4” plan would allow for that continuity (Koos, 1923).

Shortly after World War II, however, the “6-4-4” plan was eliminated at institutions because it lacked a “traditional” structure in which secondary education lasted until grade 12. Ultimately, funding and a lack consistency in regulations for both tertiary (post-secondary) institutions and secondary institutions made the plan obsolete (Kisker, 2006). While the “6-4-4” scheme had strong foundations in educational and psychological research, it would be another few decades before a similar structure would be tried again.

During the 1970s, a variation of the “6-4-4” plan emerged and is the precursor to the ECHS. According to Kisker (2006), Janet Lieberman established the first public “Middle College High School” in the United States. This school, affiliated with LaGuardia Community College in New York, helped low-income students acquire a higher education. Lieberman (1998) believed that students were particularly vulnerable to dropping out of school between the 9th and 10th grade, and that their lack educational persistence was a “function of school” anomalies. Lieberman sought to fix this issue by changing the structure of their education to integrate secondary and post-secondary education, and improving the overall student developmental experience by raising student aspirations, incorporating student-focused collaboration, and improving leadership at the

administrative level (Lieberman, 1998). Ultimately, the students were placed in an academically rigorous environment that integrated coursework and provided the support needed for the students to maintain high levels of academic performance (Hawkins, 2005; Kisker, 2006; Lieberman, 1998). Within the next decade, additional funding was obtained and nearly 20 middle college high schools were instituted (Nodine, 2009). The benefits of and consistent funding for this type of institution provided middle college high schools with the longevity that “6-4-4” institutions did not have. The greater success of the Middle College High School, positioned this institutional type as a precursor and template for the ECHS in the 21st century.

Both the “6-4-4” plan and the middle college high school programs sought to improve the educational attainment of students and were developed in response to a nationwide need to increase the levels of educational attainment for the country’s population (Kisker, 2006). While both of these programs were short-lived, their potential effectiveness in improving the rate of college-going high school graduates established them as a useful option for integrating secondary and post-secondary education and supporting student transition from high school to college. During the last 20 years, the desire for educational reform increased as institution and government officials desired higher levels of enrollment in colleges and universities. In addition, curriculum alignment, increased academic rigor and improved preparation for college became more important. Both dual enrollment and the concept of the ECHSs were mechanisms identified by institutions and policy-makers to accomplish this goal (Nodine, 2009).

ECHSs Now

The Early college high school initiative (ECHSI) was founded in 2001 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and revived the concept of the ECHS (Arshavsky et al., 2010; Hoffman et al., 2009). The ECHSI established ECHSs as small-sized schools that would support the development and growth of students and integrate secondary and post-secondary education to ease the student transition to a post-secondary environment (Nodine, 2009). While an ECHS is similar to the middle college school in purpose, the difference is that ECHSs can be located at either a secondary or post-secondary institution, and students receive college credit, even earning an associates degree upon graduation (Nodine, 2009). The potential for increased education rates and early educational attainment drew attention to this education format.

The ECHSI enlisted partners, such as Jobs for the future (JFF) to help make connections between secondary and post-secondary institutions. These connections allowed for additional financial support and political advocacy, as well as organizational and structural support, and training for staff and administrators affiliated with ECHSs. With the help of one of its major partners, JFF, ECHSs were constructed with a favorable “ecosystem” in mind that would limit “disruptive technologies” that would keep students from persisting, and prevent any external interference in the running of such institutions (Nodine, 2009).

By 2013-2014, 280 ECHSs were operating in 32 states, with over 80,000 students enrolled (Jobs for the Future, 2014). In Texas alone, there are 65 ECHSs serving 20,000

students in 25 counties (Educate Texas, 2014). The institutional arrangement varies, with some ECHSs located on community college and 4-year college campuses and others remaining on high school grounds. According to Jobs for the Future (2014), 44% of ECHSs are located on college campuses, the remaining are either freestanding or located on Native American reservations.. Most of these institutions are placed on college campuses to provide students with an integrated secondary and post-secondary experience, exposing students to campus resources that aid in the transition to college life (Alvarado & Peeble-Wilkins, 2003; Jobs for the Future, 2010; Jobs for the Future, 2014; Kuo, 2010).

ECHSs were created to serve minority, first-generation college students who may not have access to the resources necessary to aid them in their adjustment to college (Hawkins, 2005; Nodine, 2009). Of the 80,000 students served by ECHSs, 73% are students of color and nearly 60% are eligible for free or reduced lunch, the latter of which qualifies these students as low-income (Jobs for the Future, 2014). These populations of students, who are not likely to complete college, meet with higher graduation and matriculation rates than their non-ECHS enrolled peers. In the last ten years, research has found that 90% of ECHS students graduate from high school in four years as compared to the national average of 78% (Jobs for the Future, 2014). These students are also more likely to attend college and to persist. Students' academic performance and matriculation to college provide support for the continued creation of ECHSs.

Providing sufficient services to students in need requires extensive planning, and for an ECHS can cost up to 12% more to run than other high schools (Early College High School Initiative, 2009; Killough, 2009). To manage cost and resources, ECHSs are partnered with higher education institutions, including community colleges and four-year institutions. These partnerships allow a variety of services to be available to students, and broaden the student experience to include aspects of both high school and college life and learning. Students participate in a number of common high school extra-curricular and social activities (Chmelynski, 2004). Yet, students have access to other activities, events, and resources found on college campuses and designed for college students (Valadez, 2013; Berger et al., 2013; Jobs for the Future, 2014).

Through enrollment in an ECHS, students will not only have their high school diploma by graduation, they will also have an associate's degree which, depending upon the institution, will guarantee up to two years of college credit (The Early College High School Initiative, 2009). ECHSs, through structure, curriculum, and collaboration, maximize the student experience and provide the students with the formal accreditation (e.g., college credit and/or an associate's degree) and the skills for academic advancement.

The academic support offered by these institutions is extensive. ECHSs structure their classes and academic support in a way that ensures a student's academic success (Early College High School Initiative, 2009; McDonald & Farrell 2012). Class size remains small to encourage focused instruction and one-on-one interaction between

faculty and students. Also, academic support services enrich the classroom experience and help the student synthesize the information learned in class (Born, 2006). In other words, students are not simply challenged, they are challenged and supported as they navigate the difficulties of advanced coursework and the expectations of high achievement.

The characteristics of ECHSs, from the outside funding and support, to the collaboration with higher education, and the organizational and curricular structure, provide numerous benefits to students, increasing enrollment in 4-year institutions and allowing for a smoother transition into college (Early College High School Initiative, 2009). While in many cases gaps exist between what students are taught at a secondary level and what they are expected to know and do at a post-secondary level, ECHSs combine these levels of education, acclimating students to the rigor of college coursework and eliminating some barriers to a successful transition to a college or university (Hartwell, 2009).

Major Research

Some data exist on the academic performance of students enrolled in an ECHS, in addition to reports on academic performance, post-ECHS graduation and the effectiveness of the structure of the education provided by ECHSs for students' academic success. The following section includes major reports on the operation of ECHSs completed at a national level, state level, and local level. These reports are reviewed based on content and methodology with gaps and deficiencies being critiqued.

National Level Research

In 2009 and 2013, the ECHSI published extensive reports about the nation-wide success of ECHSs (Berger et al., 2009; Berger et al., 2013). These reports provide general enrollment statistics and information on the student experience, student outcomes, partner-college views, and sustaining the success and existence of ECHSs. The reports also include both quantitative and qualitative data collected through surveys distributed to stakeholders, including students, staff, and administrators, and site visits and interviews with stakeholders and particularly graduates of ECHSs (Berger et. al., 2009; Berger et al., 2013).

For the 2009 report, the research questions focus on the organizational characteristics of ECHSs, how policy affected these institutions, the role of partnering institutions or organizations, outcomes for students, and how implementation of these institutions related to student outcomes. The framework used examines how the national and local contexts of the establishment of an ECHS affect student outcomes (Berger et. al., 2009).

The 2013 report differs in that it focuses primarily on the impact of ECHSs on the student experience (Berger et. al., 2013). This study was conducted with the assumption that if underrepresented students were engaged in the ECHS format, including a rigorous curriculum, and with the expectation they would achieve a higher education, they would be more likely to attend and graduate from a four-year institution (Berger et. al., 2013).

2009 report. This report centered on student outcomes, student engagement, school partnerships, and how ECHSs maintained momentum. The findings of the report illustrate the growth of the ECHSI and the overall success of ECHSs in producing academically successful students. The report also identifies institutional factors critical to student success rates. From 2002 to 2007, the number of ECHSs grew from 3 to 157, with 65% of these institutions being partnered with 2-year institutions, and over half of all ECHSs being located on a 2 or 4-year institution's campus. The average size of ECHSs is small, with an average of less than 100 students per grade. Nationally, ECHSs serve high rates of minority students, with 67% students of color, and 59% low-income. In addition, nearly half of the students enrolled indicated that they were first-generation college students (i.e., neither parent attended college) (Berger et al., 2009).

Integrating the secondary and post-secondary curriculum increases student time on a college campus and opportunity for students to engage in college-level coursework and interact with college faculty. In relation to rigor, relevance, and relationships, the “new 3Rs,” students emphasized that they felt challenged by the curriculum, that it was useful, and that relationships with faculty and students were important. Academic support in the form of tutoring and social and academic programing also proved critical to students' classroom success. Nearly 90% of institutions have such supports available, and most students utilized those supports whether or not their institutions required them to do so. Students at ECHSs were also slightly more likely than non-ECHS students to utilize high school to college transition support (Berger et al., 2009).

This study included ACT and SAT preparation and college application assistance as two of the major transition activities supported by ECHSs. Students utilized these supports and indicated they were helpful, and also offered suggestions about how not only the students, but the families of students needed more information and instruction to navigate the transition from high school to college. Administrators interviewed for this report indicated that the transition supports were helpful, but there should be more emphasis on helping the students become self-advocates (Berger et al., 2009).

This study examined student “intermediate outcomes,” or students’ “academic engagement” (e.g., grades and seeking help) and “academic self-concept” (e.g., understanding self as a learner). In the area of academic engagement, first-generation college students and male students were less engaged, while female students and students from non-English speaking homes had the highest levels of engagement. The results for “academic self-concept” were similar. First-generation students possessed a lower “academic self-concept” than non-first-generation students.

Student outcomes were measured by standardized exam proficiency, high school GPAs and the estimated college GPAs of students who have already graduated from an ECHS. While students generally scored higher on state academic assessments, high school GPAs and college GPAs were usually lower than what the students estimated. Students also progressed through high school at a rate of 85% with 88% of graduates enrolling in college during the fall. Overall, the participation and engagement students

experienced while enrolled at an ECHS appear to be helpful for students in preparing for college (Berger et al., 2009).

The partnerships ECHSs create with local higher education institutions were critical to the success of the students enrolled. The dedication of administrators to the success of the ECHS and partnering institution as well as the role of the college liaison were important in establishing and maintaining a positive relationship between partnering institutions. Also, the level of “buy-in” from faculty and staff at both the ECHS and post-secondary institution was important. Conflicts, poor or difficult scheduling, and lack of interest in professional development could be a hindrance to the development of positive relationship between partnering institutions (Berger et al., 2009).

The role of intermediaries, such as JFF, was examined in relation to their role in the success of the ECHSs. Intermediaries have a prominent role in planning and are responsible for acquiring funding to support ECHSs. The decrease in funds available has made this responsibility critical to the growth of the ECHSI (Berger et al., 2009). To garner financial support, assessment was deemed important. Both ECHSs and their partnering institutions were responsible for tracking and reporting data so that intermediaries could utilize that information to acquire resources.

The overall report findings show that the vast majority of students served by ECHSs were low-income, minority, and first-generation students and that academic, personal and social supports were critical to these students’ academic success. The report further identifies that ECHSs located on a college campus enhanced the student

experience, promoted student engagement, and better prepared students for the transition to a 4-year institution. The breadth of the report however, does not allow for a deeper understanding of the factors that impact student learning and personal growth and specifically how ECHSs help students in their transition to college.

2013 report. The 2013 report focused on some of the same information as the 2009 report, but specifically examined if “early college students have better outcomes than they would have had at other high schools” and if “the impact of Early Colleges vary by student background characteristics” (Berger et. al., 2013, pg. iv). In this study, data was collected through a lottery design, and 10 schools that had graduated at least one class of students were selected. The participants included students who were offered a place in an ECHS and students who were not. The study utilized two data sources: educational records and student surveys. The administrative records were used to identify student characteristics and educational outcomes while the surveys collected from the students provided information about the student experiences. The data gathered from the ECHS students was compared to the data gathered from the non-ECHS students (Berger et. al., 2013).

The study revealed that students enrolled in an ECHS had significantly better achievement outcomes than students who were not enrolled in an ECHS. Specifically, ECHS students scored on average in the 64th percentile for standardized language arts assessments and non-ECHS students scored in the 59th percentile. In Texas, the difference in math scores was also statistically significant with ECHS students scoring

higher than their non-ECHS peers. Average GPAs for ECHS and non-ECHS students were the same. High school completion rates differed significantly, with 86% of ECHS students graduating compared to 80% of non-ECHS students graduating (Berger et al., 2013).

The study acknowledged that the critical role of the ECHSI is to help students achieve a four-year degree. In addition to high school achievement, the researchers examined college outcomes (Berger et al., 2013). College enrollment rates while in high school were significantly higher for ECHS students as compared to non-ECHS students. By their fourth year of high school, 63.1% of ECHS students had a minimum of one record of college enrollment, compared to 22.9% of non-ECHS students. Rates for the year after high school graduation show that 77.4% of ECHS students were enrolled in college while 66.7% of non-ECHS students were enrolled in college (Berger et. al., 2013). These high rates of enrollment illustrate that students from underrepresented groups who are typically less likely to attend college, may be more likely to attend if they are enrolled in an ECHS. In addition, ECHS students were able earn a four-year degree at a faster rate than non-ECHS students (Berger et. al., 2013).

Student performance after leaving the ECHS environment does not differ greatly from the performance of non-ECHS students. ECHS and non-ECHS graduates took remedial courses at the same rates and had similar GPAs and persistence rates. The only difference was that ECHS graduates perceived college-level work to be less difficult than their non-ECHS peers (Berger et. al., 2013).

The ECHSs in the study fulfilled their role in placing students on a path to a four-year degree. This study further examined what aspects of the ECHS experience helped students get to this point. The ECHS students surveyed identified the benefit of taking college-level courses while in high school. College exposure allowed the students to understand the benefit of attending college in addition to earning college credit (Berger et al., 2013). Comparison non-ECHS students participated in rigorous academic activities like AP courses and exams, but did not report they felt their high school experience was academically rigorous at the same rates as ECHS students (Berger et al., 2013). The participants were also surveyed about the support they received in high school to manage academic rigor. Overall, ECHS students experienced higher college-going expectations from their schools and were given more support from their schools during the college application process (Berger et al., 2013).

The findings of this report indicate that ECHS students performed better academically and had higher rates of enrollment in college-level courses while in high school and are more likely to attain a four-year degree (Berger et al., 2013). ECHS students also indicated they experienced greater exposure to college life, and were able to handle a high level of academic rigor, and a received a substantial amount of support with the college application process (Berger et al., 2013). As compared to the 2009 Berger et al. study, this most recent research provides more detailed and nuanced information regarding the student experience, and more closely examines how ECHSs are meeting some of the core principles of the ECHSI. However, this study also has some limitations

in that it is specific to the 10 ECHSs selected for research and, as Berger et al. indicate, the findings apply to the years in which it was conducted. Over time the practices of ECHSs and practices within secondary education have changed, possibly changing the differences in performance and experience of ECHS and non-ECHS students (Berger et al., 2013). Overall, though, this report is helpful in that it has begun to elucidate the process of examining the individual ECHS student experience and giving ECHS students the opportunity to share and critically reflect upon their needs as they navigate a difficult and rewarding academic experience.

State Level Research

Reporting at the state level has become critical to attaining funding for ECHSs and other high school reform initiatives (Berger et. al., 2010). The Texas High School Project (THSP) released its most recent findings on the success of the programs and institutions within its purview, including ECHSs (Young et al., 2010). Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through surveys, interviews, site visits, and case studies to answer research questions about factors in the implementation of THSP programs and, in particular, how the established programs impact student outcomes (Young et al., 2010). The study evaluated the multiple programs managed by the THSP. However, due to the specific topic of this study and this literature review, this section will focus primarily on the findings regarding Texas ECHSs.

The findings of this state level report are similar to the national-level findings and center on “ECHS Core Elements:” School Design, Target Population, P-16 Partnership,

Curriculum and Academic Rigor, Support Structures, Staffing and the impact of the implementation of these core elements on student outcomes (Young et al., 2010).

Both the P-16 partnerships and school design were critical to the operation of an ECHS. The study indicates that the quality of the relationship between the partnering institutions were important factors in creating a “college going” culture that resulted from a thoughtfully combined secondary and post-secondary curriculum and the integration of academic and non-academic, social supports for target populations of students. The design of ECHSs and the recruiting efforts of the institutions ensured that low-income, minority, and first-generation students would be the primary population enrolled (Young et al., 2010).

To support this population, ECHSs refined instruction methods, and trained teachers in collaborative instruction techniques to aid students as they mastered a rigorous curriculum. Young et al. (2010) emphasizes that the curricular rigor “necessitates that the ECHS provide enough academic and social-emotional support for the target population to enable them to succeed” (p. 66). The study indicated that at each of the ECHSs, academic, social and emotional supports were provided through advising, tutoring, and study skills classes. Teachers also made an effort to help students learn “appropriate college behaviors and expectations.” Access to similar supports at the partnering higher education institution also proved to be critical. The study found, though, that students were more comfortable seeking assistance from the ECHS. This weight on the ECHS and its staff left many teachers struggling to balance supporting the

students and encouraging the students to independently and autonomously seek assistance.

The implementation of these core elements of the ECHS program in Texas is expected to have an effect on student outcomes, including standardized test scores, attendance, and GPAs. In fact, this study found that ECHS students scored higher and were significantly more likely to pass the TAKS than their non-ECHS peers. Students also had higher attendance rates and were more likely to pass to the next grade and participate in other accelerated learning activities than their non-ECHS peers (Young et al., 2010).

The state-level report reveals much about the growth and development of the ECHSI within Texas. Even though there was structural and practical variation between ECHSs, increased clarity about and support for accomplishing the core principles aided with the refinement of the services and supports offered to students. Students achieved higher levels of success than their non-ECHS peers, which is promising for the program. However, the report cautions that the funding required for the ECHSI may become prohibitive for further development of ECHSs (Young et al., 2010). The Texas Education Agency and the ECHS network have a critical role in sustaining the program and ensuring that the ECHS models are coherent and flexible to fit the needs of the communities in which the ECHSs are established.

Though this report indicates the level of success ECHSs are meeting in Texas, the findings are still limited. Methods of staff training and development were still in

experimental stages (Young et al., 2010). With students indicating that their interactions with staff and the support they received both in and out of the classroom were important to their success, the refinement of teaching methods and curriculum support was urgent and necessary. Also, while this study reveals that these students were academically successful (based on TAKS results and graduation rates) and were more likely to enroll in college, there was no indication of the level of effectiveness of these institutions in relation to student preparedness once in college. The students from whom data were collected were enrolled in an ECHS and/or had not yet begun their full-time college career. If the role of the ECHS is to aid in a student's transition to college, then data collected once these students are enrolled full-time in a 4-year institution may provide a more precise portrait of the effectiveness of the curriculum and supports in place in an ECHS.

Local Level Research

JFF (2011) published one of the larger reports about the success of ECHSs in the state of Texas. The data collected from these ECHSs revealed factors contributing to students' academic success. The study measured the success of two institutions: Mission Early College High School in El Paso and Collegiate High School in Corpus Christi. These locations were significant because they serve predominantly Latino, low-income, first-generation college students at a higher rate than both the average school district and ECHSs. This study focused on the academic performance of the students, using standardized exam scores as indicators of academic success. The study further examined

the college-going rates of ECHS graduates, and the number of students receiving a “Commended Performance,” meaning they scored above the minimum requirement to pass.

Students were interviewed about the quality of academic support, with questions based on four dimensions for student success: academic content, cognitive strategies, academic behaviors and skills, and college knowledge (Jobs for the Future, 2011). Conley (2010) identified each of these areas as components critical to the success of students in college:

Cognitive strategies: includes the ability apply content learned to identify, interpret, assess and solve an issue or problem

Content knowledge: means that ECHSs provide the “big ideas” about the major academic disciplines

Academic behaviors: centers on a student’s ability to be a student, understand how to study, set goals and work collaboratively, and, in general, self-manage

College knowledge: includes the preparation and information provided to students regarding the details of applying, enrolling, and registering at a college or university.

The five students interviewed were asked to speak about their level of preparation, with their statements applied to these four factors that are keys to college readiness.

This report primarily relied on results from the Math and Reading TAKS as indicators of academic success and college readiness. For both Math and Reading, Mission and Collegiate High Schools scored significantly higher than Texas school district averages, and higher than Texas ECHS averages (Jobs for the Future, 2011). In addition to test scores, both institutions reported higher rates of college enrollment for

graduates. Nationally, 86% of ECHS graduates enroll in college (Nodine, 2009). Both Mission Early College High School and Collegiate High School were on par with the national average, and had enrollment rates higher than the state average of 57% (Jobs for the Future, 2011). Both higher test scores and college enrollment rates indicate that the ECHSs' programs and curriculum contribute to the success of the students.

This report also collected five students' perspectives about the academic support at ECHSs and how that support helped them succeed. The number of participants interviewed was limited making the data collected less generalizable. However, a few emerging themes appeared that warrant further exploration. The college-enrolled ECHS graduates were asked for their perspectives on the preparation and support provided by the ECHSs in which they were enrolled. Overall, students indicated the support provided by their ECHSs spanned the four factors for college readiness (Jobs for the Future, 2011). Academic rigor, high expectations from faculty and administrators and interactive activities prepared them for the academic rigor they would face in college. Students also shared that activities such as group work helped them to think critically and analytically, and that tutoring, one-on-one interaction with teachers and group work improved their understanding of coursework and how to manage the challenging rigor.

In the area of college knowledge, students indicated that the one-on-one support and the information received from counselors and teachers in applying for college and understanding the process of attending college was helpful to them. Also, being on a college campus and being exposed to speakers from various institutions increased their

understanding of the college environment (Jobs for the Future, 2011). While the report did not go into detail about the students' perspectives on the impact of academic and social support received once enrolled in college, it indicates that at least one of the students interviewed felt that he or she was better prepared for college life because of the support received.

This report revealed that ECHSs can improve students' level of preparedness for college and offer curriculum and academic and non-academic supports that aid in the transition to college (Jobs for the Future, 2011). However, the report has major limitations in relation to student perspectives. The sample size of students is small and the interviews collected data on what aspects of support students utilized. While this is helpful in determining levels of use of specific services, there is little indication of how and in what ways these supports are useful to these students while they are in college. Further exploration may be necessary to determine just how effective these supports are in helping these students as they transition.

At the national, state and local levels, these studies indicated that ECHSs were helpful to students by creating a supportive educational environment and improving student academic performance. However, each of these reports is limited in offering information regarding specific services and their impact on a student's ability to transition to college life. What they do offer, though, is a foundation for further research to gain deeper and more nuanced understanding of how ECHSs aid students in that transition.

ECHS Studies

National, state, and local ECHSI reports emphasized the construction of ECHSs and how that construction contributed to the academic success of students and their ability to make the transition to college life. Additional studies, delved more deeply into the student experience. These studies collected both qualitative and quantitative data about student academic performance and their experience within an ECHS. They also examined various aspects of the development of ECHSs, revealing knowledge gaps about aspects of ECHSs contribute to student success. This section provides an overview and critique of six peer-reviewed studies, two of which are focused on ECHSs and two offering an analysis of factors supporting student transition to college. The last four studies are important because the literature on ECHSs has not offered an in-depth view of the student experience.

Berger, Adelman, and Cole study. Berger, Adelman, and Cole (2010), provided a history of the ECHSI and, utilizing the core principles of the ECHSI as a framework, reviewed ECS data on student outcomes. Their analysis revealed that ECHSs were fulfilling each of the five core principles to some degree (Berger et al., 2010). ECHSs studied were making an effort to recruit minority, low-income, first-generation college students. They were also developing strong partnerships with higher education institutions, and are developing internal supports to help students navigate challenging college-level coursework (Berger et al., 2010).

This study revealed deficiencies on the part of ECHSs and their partnering institutions. Specifically, while these institutions successfully recruited minority and low-income students, questions exist as to what degree first-generation college students were enrolled in these institutions. The researchers suggested that students may not be a reliable source in determining to what degree their parents are educated (Berger et al., 2010). Also, there was no clear indication to what extent students were taking advantage of the college-level courses made available to them and to what degree and how students used the “support system” the fourth core principle indicates is necessary for student success. While research revealed that students were using support and that the support was helpful with their transition to college, according to Berger et al. (2010), schools and educators were struggling “to strike a balance between requiring students to attend support activities and teaching students to be self-advocates and find supports on their own when they need assistance” (p. 342). Teachers were particularly concerned about whether or not, the students will seek academic, social, or emotional support once they enter a four-year institution.

This study also focused on student outcomes for academic progress and enrollment in college-level courses (Berger et al., 2010). The researchers showed that most students would graduate from an ECHS with at least 10 college classes completed, and ECHS characteristics, such as longevity, site location, and method of start-up affect outcomes. One of the major characteristics the research emphasized was the location of the ECHS. Berger et al. (2010) assert that when an ECHS was located on a college

campus, student retention rates were higher and these higher rates suggest that “a college campus engenders in [students] an idea of themselves as individuals who can negotiate an adult environment and succeed intellectually” (p. 344). Students who had greater levels of exposure to a college environment were likely to attend college.

This study offered a thoughtful analysis of available data regarding the success of ECHSs on students’ academic achievement. However, the most significant limitation is that the breadth of the data allowed for little consideration, determination and exploration of particular factors that contribute to student outcomes. Specifically, while this study asserted that these schools achieved the core principles of the ECHSI, there were few indicators of how the core principles related to student success (Berger et al., 2010). The core principles should be more thoroughly explored to understand how they contributed to the college readiness of these students and the success of these students after they graduate and become full-time college students.

Thompson and Ongaga study. Thompson and Ongaga (2011) offered a more focused analysis of how ECHSs as “small learning communities” provided students with the support and the environment needed for academic success. The authors used the ECHSI framework of “rigor, relevance, and relationships” or the “3Rs” to illuminate the factors critical to student success (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011, p. 44). In this study, the institution selected serves primarily minority, low-income, first-generation college students. Staff and students were selected to participate in interviews or focus groups. The data collected were analyzed according to an “ethics of care” framework, which

includes: “(1) modeling – caring by example; (2) practice – opportunities for practicing care and reflecting on that practice; (3) dialogue – a method by which attempts to care are discussed and evaluated as a community, and (4) confirmation – affirming and encouraging the best in others” (Thomas & Ongaga, p. 47).

Two major themes emerged from the data: caring relationships and teacher constraints. Personal and caring relationships between teacher and student were important to students. Close relationships with and personalized attention and help from teachers gave students a sense of safety as they faced the academic rigor of the ECHS. In addition to student-teacher relationships, student-student relationships were also critical to students feeling they were in a safe and secure learning environment (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011).

Another type of relationship that teachers mentioned was the one between the ECHS and the partnering college or university. Teachers felt it was important to support students in a way that would be helpful to them when they took college-level courses and eventually enrolled in a college full time. The ECHS support services such as tutoring, graduation coaches, and mentors created a link to the type of services offered at the university level (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). The authors suggest that students who were comfortable using such services at an ECHS might be more likely to access such services as full-time college students.

While relationships are important, teachers expressed that they were faced with numerous challenges. Specifically, teachers pointed to the novelty of the ECHS concept.

They felt unfamiliar with the ECHS structure and staff expectations. They also felt “test pressure,” and struggled to balance the need to teach students to succeed on state assessments and utilize creative avenues of teaching to enhance student learning (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011).

The overall findings of the study suggested that the ECHSs have a positive effect on the learning environment. The student-teacher interactions, small school size, and the student-centered philosophy supported the ECHSI framework of “rigor, relationships, and relevance” and allowed students to feel comfortable and supported in an academically challenging environment. This study noted, though, that there is little known regarding how these students fare once they are full-time students in a college setting. The study further suggested that how these students adjust to and deal with the academic rigors of the college environment should be examined (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). This examination may offer an understanding of how effective ECHSs are in easing the student transition from secondary to post-secondary education.

Smith and Zhang study. While studies exploring the student transition from ECHS to a 4-year institution have not been conducted, studies that examine the transition from high school to college may be helpful in understanding unexplored aspects of the effectiveness of ECHSs. Smith and Zhang (2009), conducted a study about student perception of the transition process from secondary to post-secondary education and what factors (e.g., experiences, individuals, and programs) helped these students with that transition. The researchers administered a survey to first-year college students. This

survey focused primarily on the perceived helpfulness of orientation programs, seminars and advisors as well as high school teachers and high school guidance counselors (Smith & Zhang, 2009).

The findings show that students believed that parents, high school teachers, and high school guidance counselors provided the greatest level of support and were the most helpful in the easing the transition to college. The findings also show a positive relationship between college GPA and the frequency with which parents, high school teachers and counselors, and friends discussed college preparation (Smith & Zhang, 2009).

Smith and Zhang argue that parents maintain a major role in student success, and that high schools should pay more attention to college bound students (2009):

If school districts are serious in their quest to increase the number of college bound minorities then they should provide more resources for guidance counseling and information about preparing for and gaining access to college....[The] analysis suggests that high schools and colleges should work together to ensure that college bound students, particularly those who are disadvantaged, receive the academic assistance that they need to make a smooth transition to college (p. 655).

This study reinforces the ECHS core principle regarding the integration of the secondary and post-secondary environment and the necessity of providing students with “college knowledge” to aid in their transition to college (Conley, 2010). This study also offers a broad view of factors that aid students in their transition to college. The strength of this transition study exists in its identification of student perceptions of support as well as elements of support that influence student success when adjusting to college. The

difference between perception of help and actual help is an important area that the researchers suggested needs further examination as perception may have some relationship to student success (Smith & Zhang, 2009).

The Smith and Zhang (2009) study examined and analyzed student perceptions, but focuses primarily on relationships between students and individuals who provide help. Reason et al. (2006) conducted a study that focuses on multiple factors that influence student transition during the first year of college. The researchers assert that the first year of college is not only important in a student's cognitive and academic development, it is also important to student persistence.

Reason et al. study. Utilizing Alexander Astin's Inputs-Environment-Outputs framework, student growth was measured according to curriculum taken, classroom engagement, and extra-curricular activities and involvement (Reason et al., 2006). By analyzing data from the National Survey of Student Engagement and a second survey given to faculty, the researchers determined that student perception of support was the strongest predictor of student academic competence. Specifically, students who felt they were supported by faculty and staff were also more likely to be cognitively engaged and academically competent. The study also suggests that in-depth studies of the first-year of college need to be conducted to support the development and growth of programs and practices that aid in student transition (Reason et al., 2006).

The strength of this study is in its integration of multiple factors of the college environment, including curriculum, classroom experience, and extra-curricular

engagement, for use as a framework for analyzing how students transition to college during their first year. This study also includes a large number of participants and is highly generalizable. While this study identifies some of the critical factors to students' growth and development during their first year of college, due to its breadth, it lacks a closer examination of those factors and how they specifically work to support student transition during the first year (Reason et al., 2006). Additional studies that examine student perceptions of support and delve more deeply into the factors identified by both Reason et al. (2006) and Smith and Zhang (2010), may offer a greater understanding of how those factors influence student transition, particularly for students enrolled in ECHSs.

Cravey study. Cravey (2013) examined the ECHS student culture, and specifically focuses on the “motivations and aspirations” of ECHS students. This study utilized an ethnographic design. Students from five ECHSs in Texas were interviewed in focus groups and asked about their various social patterns and activities and how they made decisions regarding their education (Cravey, 2013). Cravey also observed the physical environment in which the ECHSs were located.

This study identified major themes within the ECHS culture: “diversity, respect, responsibility, safety, learning, and caring” (Cravey, 2013). The students interviewed expressed an understanding and appreciation of the differences in the population of ECHS students. They also indicated a sense of responsibility to themselves, their family and friends, and their education. The students found they were able to comfortably

pursue their education without mockery from or fear of their peers, and with the support of faculty and staff who made the ECHS a “safe place” for them to learn and grow (Cravey, 2013).

The outcome of this study reinforced the ECHSI’s emphasis on creating an encouraging and supportive environment in which students acquired the skills and resources they needed to gain a higher education. The schools used for this study created a positive and constructive school culture that students identified as important to their high school experience. Additional studies focused on the ECHS culture would be beneficial in that they provide ECHS students with the opportunity to share their experiences. Also, while this study does not attempt to connect the student experience to student success, future studies could explore the relationship between the ECHS culture and student outcomes to see what aspects of the student experience at the ECHS level were helpful to students once they started college.

McDonald and Farrell study. McDonald and Farrell (2012) examined the student experience, specifically utilizing focus groups interviews to learn more about students’ perceptions of their own college readiness. A total of 31 ECHS students in their freshman or sophomore year participated in this study. They were interviewed to learn more about their academic preparedness, social preparedness and personal preparedness (McDonald and Farrell, 2012).

After data collection and analysis, five themes appeared: Readiness, Learning Community, Identity, and Productivity (McDonald and Farrell, 2012). Under the

Readiness theme, students identified their ability to remain disciplined and focused, their sense of individual and group responsibility and their ability to manage time as important to their success. They also identified the social environment, group accountability, and support they received from faculty, staff and other students as being helpful with their academic preparation and confidence (McDonald and Farrell, 2012). Their increased confidence contributed to their sense of identity. As students became more socially acclimated to the ECHS environment, they felt more comfortable with being themselves and understood the social expectations of being in the college environment through the experience of taking college-level courses. They also gained a “scholarly” identity, in which they accepted being viewed as capable and smart and were proud of their abilities (McDonald & Farrell, 2012). McDonald and Farrell (2012) identified productivity as a major underlying theme for the previous four. The students revealed an understanding of the importance of remaining focused on their future and that a measure of self-control and delayed gratification would help keep them on the path to earning a four-year degree.

The researchers suggested that this type of environment was beneficial to students because of the smaller learning model and the level and quality of academic and social support built in to the student experience. Further study of this area could expand the understanding of the ECHS student experience and the experience of students in other forms of accelerated education (McDonald and Farrell, 2012). This study is helpful and informative in that it offered students the opportunity to share their perceptions regarding their ECHS experience. However, it does not provide enough information to determine if

those students who perceive they are prepared for college were indeed prepared for college once they left the ECHS environment and entered a four-year institution. Additional, longitudinal research may be helpful in determining if these students' perceptions of the support they received change over time.

ECHS Literature Summary

The national, state, and local reports as well as the ECHS studies on the success of ECHSs provided critical information regarding the impact the establishment of these institutions has on student academic performance and closing the gap between high-performing and low-performing students. Overall, the research shows that these students have met with some level of academic success, engaging more in school work, scoring well on standardized assessments, earning college credit, and graduating from high school (Kuo, 2010).

Three major themes were revealed in the literature: academic and social support, ECHS culture, and relationships between the ECHS and the partnering institution. The research in the past decade focuses extensively on student academic performance and the factors that contributed to student success. The research reports and studies discussed in this literature review revealed that students who performed well credited their success to the high expectations from their teachers and extensive student support in the form of tutoring, collaborative learning opportunities, and mentoring/advising. Student use of these resources is related to the degree of their academic success.

Students also identified the general ECHS culture as being a critical factor in their experience. The general expectation of success, that they will attend a four-year institution upon graduation, and the sense of community between students who are navigating a challenging experience have all contributed to ECHS students' academic competence. These students accepted their scholarly identities and were comfortable enough in their environment to become academically successful and want to maintain that success without the risk of being ostracized.

An additional factor critical to student success is the type of relationship the ECHS has with its partnering post-secondary institution. ECHSs located on or close to the partnering campus allowed students greater access to on-campus resources and give the ECHS more of a "college feel." With one of the primary principles of the ECHSI being to help students in their transition to college, this exposure can play a significant role in how students are able to adjust to college life once enrolled at an institution full-time.

The data collected and analyzed regarding ECHSs provides a thorough snapshot of the structure and implementation of the ECHSI and how student performance is being improved by the initiative. Both the large-scale reports and the smaller case-studies used the frameworks and principles of the ECHSI to base their research. The earlier studies also focused closely on solid quantitative extant data, while the more recent studies collected more qualitative data elucidating the nuances of the ECHS student experience. In the past few years, the amount of research on ECHSs has increased. However, the

research is limited, and does not examine students' academic performance once they have graduated from an ECHS. While this can be attributed to the fact that ECHSs are newly established and many ECHSs have either not graduated any students or have only graduated one or two classes of students in the past couple of years, information regarding these students once they have matriculated is lacking.

Recommendations

The ECHSI principles focus on the academic success of students with emphasis on providing a curriculum and academic and social support that will assist students with the transition to college (Berger et al., 2010). However, studies have not yet been conducted on this particular topic. Current research recommends that the transition from high school to college be further explored to better understand whether or not and how the academic and social supports in place are helpful to students once enrolled full time at a post-secondary institution (Berger et al., 2010; Reason et al., 2006; Valadez, 2013; Cravey, 2013; McDonald & Farrell, 2012).

Transition Theory Literature

The transition from high school to college involves academic, social, and emotional adjustment that influences whether or not a student will persist and graduate (Banning, 1990; Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006). ECHSs are institutions designed to help with this adjustment by integrating educational environments and providing academic and social support that prepares a student for college life. Multiple theories can be applied to this area of study, including human ecology, emerging adulthood, and

transition theories. This section of the literature review provides an overview of some of the major theories utilized to understand that critical period of adjustment which can determine whether or not a student will be successful in his or her college career.

Ecological Theory

Ecological theory presents a unique view of the transition from high school to college that other student development theories may not offer (Evans et. al., 2010). Specifically, ecological theories focus primarily on the interaction between the student and his or her environment (Banning, 1990). Both the environment and the individual influence each other, with the environment facilitating the growth and development of, in the case of an educational setting, the student. Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecology model provides a foundation for college student development theory and consists of four major components: process, person, context, and time. Process includes activities and interactions that encourage development. Support is necessary for these activities and in the case of college students, faculty, staff and support services are necessary to facilitate this development (Evans et. al., 2010). A person's characteristics may either support or limit the development of the individual as that individual faces certain tasks or processes (Evans et. al., 2010; Banning, 1990). How those characteristics influence interaction with and response to the environment can dictate the success of the individual in transition (Evans et. al., 2010).

In developmental ecology, the individual remains at the center of the environment with various levels or contexts surrounding that individual. Within the "microsystem,"

the individual interacts with the environment, and specifically with other individuals in the environment. These interactions spur the growth and development of the person. The “mesosystem” links the various microsystems and includes how those microsystems interact. The “exosystem” is a broader concept and not necessarily related to the individual in the microsystem. Rather, the exosystem refers to larger factors that influence the human environment. Specific examples are governmental policies or social and political crises. Finally, the “macrosystem,” the broadest level of context, includes cultural or social expectations and structures. Also, timing can be critical to how the processes within the various contexts work. The duration of a particular event can dictate how an individual develops and to what degree (Evans et. al., 2010).

While ecological theory is not explicitly used in student development and student affairs practice (Evans et. al., 2010), it does offer an examination of the transition between different environments and how individuals interact with the environment to develop. Banning (1990) argues for two separate environments that play a critical role in this transition: the “sending environment” and the “receiving environment.” In the case of the transition from high school to college, the high school environment is the “sending environment” and the college or university is the “receiving environment.” The degree of difference between both environments directly relates to the level of stress an individual will experience as he moves from one place to the next. ECHSs, by combining secondary and post-secondary environments, attempt to alleviate the stress of the transition to college.

Emerging Adulthood Theory

Emerging adulthood is a more recent theoretical development, focusing on individuals ages 18-25 (Arnett, 2000; Bynner, 2005). This age range is distinct from young adulthood and adolescence and results from shifting demographics in industrialized societies. Individuals in this age range have more time and ability to explore who they are and develop a sense of purpose as they seek self-sufficiency. This includes personal responsibility and identity exploration (Arnett, 2000). Arnett further suggests that this period is one in which individuals' actions are preparation for a desired future or outcome once adulthood is reached. This theory may offer some insight on how ECHS students cope with the transition to college, in particular, because most are in this period of emerging adulthood. ECHSs provide multiple opportunities for students to explore different pursuits.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg's theory of transition addresses the human ability to cope and adjust to a new environment (Evans et. al., 2010; Schlossberg, 2011). This theory examines the transition according to three steps: "individual perception of the transition, characteristics of the pretransition and posttransition environments, and characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition" (p. 213).

The initial step or variable is for the individual to understand the transition. Schlossberg (2011) describes three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevent transitions. Regardless of type, these transitions require the individual to adjust

views and perspectives, relationships, and other aspects of life to be successful (Evans et al., 2010; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995).

Once the individual is able to understand the transition, he must be able to cope with it. The ability to cope with the transition is important (Evans et. al., 2010; Schlossberg et al., 1995). Four factors influence coping. The first factor, “situation” includes whether or not the transition was anticipated, timing, the level of control the individual has, the duration of the change, whether or not the role of the individual changes or stays the same, the level of stress of the individual, and who or what is responsible for the transition. The second factor is the “self.” Personal characteristics can affect an individual’s views on life and how to cope with transition. The third factor is “support.” Social supports, such as friends, family and institutions help individuals cope with the transition. The fourth factor is “strategies,” which includes the types of strategies utilized by the person to help with the transition, whether they are attempting to modify or control that transition (Evans et al., 2010; Schlossberg et al., 1995).

The last step of the transition process is the ability to apply what has been learned through the transition to other situations and experiences (Schlossberg, 2011). The person experiencing change and coping with transition, if they have effectively negotiated that transition, should be able to reflect upon their experience and utilize the skills they learned when they encounter a difficult transition in the future.

The process of the transition is important to understand as it leads to individual growth and development. When applied to the student experience, transition theory

offers a practical way to look at whether or not students like ECHS graduates are effectively negotiating the challenges of graduating from high school and moving on to college.

Theory Summary

Ecology, emerging adulthood, and transition theory offer a way for higher education researchers and administrators to better understand the factors that affect a student's ability to transition from high school to college. They emphasize that changes in the environment are stressful and that the individual and how that individual interacts with and copes with the environment influences that transition. Personal factors and individual characteristics can influence the individual's ability to cope with change, whether positively or negatively. These theories also place the individual at the center of the transition process. While environment is critical to the ability to make a transition, the theories are focused on the human being rather than primarily on environmental factors.

Based on the emergent themes of the theories examined in this literature review, the greatest strengths of these theories exist in the consideration of the person in relation to the environment. The person and the environment are not separate entities. Rather, they are entities that interact and respond to each other. These theories also offer enough structure to form a base of educational practices and programs that aid in transition from high school to college.

Theoretical Framework

Based on the structures and usefulness of the theories reviewed, the theoretical framework for this study was Schlossberg's transition theory. In studies utilizing transition theories, pre-college traits were identified as important to student success during the first year of attendance at a college or university. These traits included the academic rigor of the secondary institution of enrollment and the academic and social support provided by the student's high school teachers, counselors, and parents (Kim & Schneider, 2005; Smith & Zhang, 2009). ECHSs emphasize the integration of the secondary and post-secondary environment so that students have an easier transition into college. However, research has not yet examined how successfully students navigate that transition and what factors have helped students cope with the academic and social stressors of college life. Transition theory and specifically, Schlossberg's theory may allow for a deeper understanding of those factors and coping mechanisms and determine if the supports offered by ECHSs actually help students as they transition from high school to college.

SUMMARY

ECHSs have improved the academic success rates of populations of students who typically struggle with high school coursework and are unable to matriculate into college. The literature regarding ECHSs and their impact on the transition from high school to college is limited (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Valadez, 2013). What the research indicates is that students felt the high expectations from teachers, the rigor of the

coursework, and the social and academic supports in place to aid with the transition to college were valuable to their adjustment as full-time college students. Studies completed on this area of research, though, revealed that student perspectives on the support and transition to college were acquired prior to students enrolling full-time at a post-secondary institution rather than during enrollment (Smith & Zhang, 2009; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). Learning more about ECHS graduates' perspectives may offer a clearer understanding of how and to what extent ECHS practices and programs effectively support students as they experience the post-ECHS transition to college life (Healy, 2009). Furthermore, a deeper level of understanding may provide the information necessary to improve and expand the ECHSI, creating more educational opportunities for deserving, yet underserved students.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter discusses the study methodology. An historical background and justification of the methodology are included as well as a description of the participants and the site. The methods for data collection and analysis are detailed.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Early college high schools (ECHSs) are one of a number of institutions or programs designed to help students with the transition from secondary to post-secondary education. The academic, social, and emotional support (e.g., tutoring, one-on-one meetings, advising, and counseling) in place at an ECHS is intended to enhance the overall student experience and offer an holistic approach to educating students, ultimately preparing those students for the transition to college and to persist once enrolled (Jobs for the Future, 2008). Quantitative data included in national, state, and local reports indicates that ECHS graduates are more likely to attend college and graduate (Berger et al., 2010). However, in-depth research on how and to what degree academic and non-academic supports help ECHS students adjust to college is limited (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010). This research seeks to provide a better understanding of the supports in place for ECHS students, and the effect those supports have had on transition between high school and college.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To better understand the impact of academic, social, and emotional support that policies and programs provide students at the ECHS level, this research focuses on

questions related to ECHS students' perception of the effect of these supports on their transition to college.

Research question one: To what degree did the support students receive while enrolled in an ECHS aid in their transition from high school to college?

Research question two: In what ways did students feel prepared or not prepared for their experiences in college?

Research question three: What aspects of the transition to college did students find most and least challenging?

Research question four: What components of the support structures provided students with an effective understanding of what they would experience once enrolled in college?

These questions aim to better understand aspects of ECHS research that have gone unexamined, and specifically provide insight on the level of preparedness of ECHS students for their transition into college.

SIGNIFICANCE

Research in education has been critical to understanding the influence of various political, social, and cultural practices and structures, and how those practices and structures affect student learning at the secondary and post-secondary level. In the last decade in particular, education has become the focus of an ever-increasing level of accountability (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006). The quality of education and the educational experience, and the academic progress of students have become important

measures in determining the effectiveness of an institution. When new programs are developed to improve the quality of education, and specifically the success and persistence of students, it is important to examine those programs as closely as possible to gain a nuanced understanding of how they do or do not work and to ultimately determine if those programs can be used for a broader audience and in a larger initiative. By more closely examining student high school to college transition support offered by ECHSs, this study may provide insight on the student experience, elucidate the needs of students who have experienced accelerated education, and offer direction for student services to improve support mechanisms for this growing population of students.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Educational research, at its roots, relies heavily upon the scientific method which was the dominant and traditional mode of research up until the latter part of the 20th century (Lichtman, 2010). Characterized by hypothesis testing and the elevation of and desire for objectivity, quantitative research methods were heavily favored by researchers and provided educational policy makers with “hard facts” upon which to base policy or legislation. However, by the 1980s a shift occurred and new and less traditional methods for research were being utilized, particularly in the social sciences and education. Social science and educational researchers desired a much deeper understanding of what was being studied. The scientific paradigms upon which quantitative research is based may be too limiting with the scientific commitment to objectivity being prohibitive of interpretation and dismissive of researcher’s understanding of reality and scope of

knowledge (Lichtman, 2010; Willis, 2007). Qualitative research offers a different approach. It is “a naturalistic, interpretive approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values etc.) within their social worlds” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 3).

The benefit of qualitative research is that it allows for the flexibility needed when measuring human behavior and social interaction and allows a more intimate examination of subjects and their experiences (Lichtman, 2010). When those experiences are unique to small groups of people, qualitative research methods permit an in-depth, and nuanced exploration of the subjects’ realities and what those realities mean.

Lichtman (2010) asserts that qualitative research is about humans and human experiences. The role of the researcher is to understand these experiences through the practice of questioning and observation. In this research, a group of students with the same secondary educational and similar post-secondary educational experiences were studied to gain a better understanding of the impact the former experience has on the latter. This study lends itself to a qualitative approach for key reasons: there is currently limited research on the topic of ECHSs, and specifically the transition experience of ECHS graduates, the number of subjects experiencing the phenomenon of ECHS-to-college transition is small, and the in-depth examination of the phenomenon could provide substantial information regarding the effectiveness of academic, social, and emotional supports in place to assist students with that transition. While quantitative data exist regarding the number of students who graduate from ECHSs and move on to a four-

year college or university, there has been little exploration of that transition and how it can be improved.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods have strengths and limitations. The use of a qualitative research design provides a number of benefits but also presents limitations or challenges (Lichtman, 2010). The strengths of a qualitative methodology, however, support the purpose of this study—to gain in-depth understanding of the transition from ECHS to college.

One of the strengths of a qualitative methodology is its ontological position that multiple realities exist (Lichtman, 2010; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). In this study, students are asked to share their individual experiences. While each of these students has made the transition from an ECHS to a four-year post-secondary institution, each student more than likely has a slightly different view of that transition and the supports provided to aid with the adjustment to college. The variability of the human experience can offer richer insight, particularly when trying to gain an holistic understanding of the human impact of a program, policy, or procedure that is new, with limited understanding of how it works.

Epistemologically, qualitative research is based on the idea that there are a multitude of methods for knowing and understanding reality (Lichtman, 2010; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Willis, 2007). While quantitative research relies heavily upon objective scientific methods of research and emphasizes the objectivity of the researcher, qualitative research acknowledges the inability of the researcher to be completely objective (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The purpose of this study is to better understand the

student experience. That experience is subjective, and how it is shared and understood is not independent of the research participant's or researcher's values and points of view. This method of research requires the researcher to acknowledge assumptions as the study is built and conducted. The strength of this lies in its ability to empower the subjects as experts of their own experience and to remind the researcher of the caution and care with which a study must be conducted to understand shades of difference between subjects' experiences, and the influence social constructs may have on the interpretation of those experiences.

While qualitative research allows for a flexible, in-depth, and descriptive method for examining the human experience, limitations are rooted in certain ontological concerns over validity and generalizability (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This study examines small group of students who have experienced a relatively unique secondary-to-post-secondary transition, graduating from and ECHS and then attending a four-year institution. The in-depth questioning of students and the examining of their unique experiences offers data that are detailed and descriptive, but it is only a "snapshot," and not necessarily generalizable. The descriptive nature of the data and interpretive role of the researcher not only limit the ability to generalize results, but also present challenges for establishing reliability and internal/external validity.

A traditional scientific approach rejects research that may not be easily replicated or valid for larger groups of people (Willis, 2007). While a traditionalist paradigm operates from the idea that "universals" exist, for this study, because of the dearth of

knowledge on its subjects and their experiences, a “universal” or “law” does not exist by which to measure those experiences. A quantitative method may not be the best approach to understand transition. Rather, qualitative methods would support the work of exploring and gaining unique and in-depth insight on such an unexamined aspect of a critical purpose of the ECHSI.

Design: Case Study

While there are multiple methods for qualitative research, this research project was a case study. Case studies are suited to focusing on a particular group of people or person in a particular setting (Willis, 2007). Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtler (2006) and Creswell (2005) asserted that case studies focus on a “bounded system” in which there are limits to the number of people who can be interviewed and limits on the period of time in which they are interviewed. This study is not meant to be generalizable, but to explore a unique experience to better identify issues and further areas of inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). A small number of students were interviewed during their critical transition period to a four-year institution. Including student voices in the discourse for ECHSs exposes the challenges of the high school to college transition, and illustrates a number of variables that effect that transition.

As opposed to a traditional scientific approach, this study did not test a hypothesis or seek enough data to support a “universal” assertion or belief (Willis, 2007). Instead, this study sought a richer understanding of the experience of transition, an understanding that a case study structure helped the researcher attain.

Willis (2007) offers a number of variations of case studies. The use of a theoretical framework, Schlossberg's theory of transition, requires an interpretation of the data collected and an application of that data to the components of that particular theory (Lichtman, 2010; Schlossberg et al., 1995). The purpose of this interpretive case study was to understand the experience of students and apply it to an overall theory of transition. Students who shared and were bounded by the unique experience and limited time period of the ECHS-to-college transition were selected and interviewed to improve the understanding of the phenomena of their transition.

SITE AND PARTICIPANTS

For this study, the site and participants selected were critical. Specifically, the ECHS, high school-level faculty offered substantial information about the support provided at the ECHS level and were pivotal in finding participants for the study. The participants graduated from the same ECHS and completed their first year of college at the time they were interviewed. This section details the selection process of both site and participants.

Method of Selection

This study utilized homogenous sampling to recruit participants. According to Creswell (2005), a homogenous sample is individuals selected for a study who have similar attributes or experiences. For this study, the site, an ECHS, and participants, ECHS graduates who completed their first year of college, were selected to gain a better understanding of their transition and to determine factors affecting that transition.

Site

While the ECHSI and the Texas High School Project both provide structure and operating principles for the operation of an ECHS, the ECHS is granted an amount of autonomy when determining institution-specific policies and procedures. Because of this, not every ECHS has the same or similar transitional support structures that are recommended by the core principles of the ECHSI, and in particular the fourth principle that mandates that each institution has methods of support in place to ease student transition to college (Nodine, 2009). The selection of a single site, rather than multiple sites offered consistency in the information provided by the students interviewed. The site was selected because of the willingness of its staff to participate in the interview process and assist the researcher with acquiring participants. No other schools asked over a period of two and a half years were willing to participate or help with this study or they became non-responsive during the selection process.

Site Selection

The researcher contacted all ECHSs throughout the state that had been established long enough to have at least one graduating class of students who completed a year of study at a four year college or university. Many ECHS administrators did not respond. Some responded to learn more about the study, but ultimately did not want to participate. The researcher also met with hostility from one administrator who expressed derision at the study topic, and suggested that no ECHS would be able to participate because of lack of time, motivation, and reason to track graduates' academic progress.

In February 2014, the researcher contacted the remaining ECHS to have a graduating class of students. The ECHS agreed to participate and the researcher submitted a research application in March of 2014 and received approval from the school district in April 2014.

Site Description

The district website provided demographic and descriptive information about the district and the ECHS and the ECHS website detailed policies and procedures for staff and students. The ECHS selected for this study is one of seven high schools in a school district in a major metropolitan area. The district served a large population of students and was one of the largest in the state. The ECHS serves traditionally underrepresented students in higher education. For this site, over 80% of the student population met at least one of the target population criterion set by the state educational agency: first-generation college student, minority group, and economically disadvantaged. The student population for the ECHS was approximately 400 students, with about 100 students admitted to the freshman class each year through a lottery system. The site is located on one of the campuses of a community college district serving the metropolitan area. ECHS students are also enrolled as students at the community college and have access to all community college resources.

Each year, the ECHS conducts informational recruitment events throughout the school district. Any eighth grade student is qualified to apply the spring semester before entering the ninth grade. The application must be completed by both the student and the

student's parent or guardian. The application requests basic biographical information and asks students to write an essay about why they want to enroll in the ECHS and what their academic and professional goals are. Parents or guardians are also asked to write a brief paragraph about why their student should be admitted to the ECHS and comment on their level of commitment to the choice of attending an ECHS.

Once admitted, students complete all school district paperwork and the community college application. Students must also meet college readiness testing standards for entrance to the community college. Students and parents/guardians sign a contract on an annual basis. At the start of their first year at the ECHS, students work with their counselor and advisory teacher to develop their four-year plan. Each year the number of college-level courses increases, and by their senior year, students are enrolled almost entirely in college-level classes.

ECHS students have access to both ECHS and community college resources and activities. The ECHS offers National Honor Society, service-based clubs, and academic organizations. Students also take field trips and are required to participate in service learning activities. At the community college level, students participate in honor societies, academic organizations, and activities such as theatre. They may also take advantage of the community college's success center, writing center, math lab, supplemental instruction and professor office hours. In addition to high school and college courses, students are enrolled in an advisory class every morning. During this time, students have brief lessons or workshops covering topics like taking the SAT or

ACT, research the college application process, are reminded about upcoming deadlines, and receive free tutoring.

During their junior and senior years, the students are enrolled in an enrichment course led by the school's independent study mentor teacher, also known as the community liaison or lead partnership teacher. The course includes participating in an internship. This internship is designed to help students better understand their career interests and gain experience that will help them with the college application process and determine a major more quickly.

Participants

The transition between high school and college is critical to overall academic success of and graduation rates of students (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006). Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtler (2006) suggest that "key informants" will provide "specific knowledge about the topic being investigated" (p. 140). These participants, by possessing that knowledge, may provide important insight, and ultimately robust and in-depth data to analysis.

For this study, the researcher sought participants who graduated from the ECHS in Spring 2013 and had completed their first full year of college at a four-year institution. The ECHS community liaison maintained contact with many of the ECHS alumni, and emailed former students who graduated from the ECHS the previous year to inquire if they were interested in participating in the study. Eleven students responded to the community liaison's email, confirming their interest, and those students' contact

information was emailed to the researcher. The researcher then emailed each potential participant with information about the study, questionnaire, and the consent form. Four students contacted were willing to participate, returning the informed consent and the questionnaire.

PROCEDURES

The procedures for this study included acquiring permission to conduct the study, working with the school district to identify participants, and selecting and working with participants to conduct the interviews and prepare the interviews for analysis.

Collecting Data

Prior to collecting data, research approval was given by the Institutional Review Board at The University of Texas at Austin. Approval from the school district for the ECHS was needed and obtained.

The community liaison, who tracks as many students as possible after graduation through social media, sent an email to students who graduated in Spring 2013 to ask permission to give the researcher their contact information. In mid-May 2014, the teacher/counselor sent the researcher a list of students and emails, and shortly thereafter the researcher sent an inquiry email to each student. The researcher received limited responses and sent follow-up emails to each student, after which four students responded and agreed to participate.

The students were contacted by email and provided study information and an informed consent form and a preliminary questionnaire to collect biographical

information (see Appendix A). Once students confirmed their participation, the researcher scheduled the first interviews. When the first interviews were completed, the researcher set up the follow-up interviews. The interviews were finished by the end of June 2014. The following weeks the researcher emailed the participants to thank them for their participation, ask them if they had any additional information to share, and to let them know to contact the researcher should they have any questions.

During the last two weeks of July 2014, a transcriptionist typed the ECHS staff and student interviews. The researcher reviewed the transcribed interviews and sent follow-up emails to each of the participants asking for clarification and any additional comments.

Interviews

Within the scope of interviews, there are multiple techniques: one-on-one, focus group, telephone, electronic, and open-ended questions or questionnaires (Creswell, 2005). For this study, a preliminary questionnaire and two individual interviews for each participant were used. The questionnaire provides the researcher with demographic information about the participants (see Appendix A). Individual interviews offer the participant the ability to speak freely and share private information about their experiences with some level of security (Creswell, 2005). ECHS staff members were interviewed for this study. Though not participants, the staff members provided additional information about the ECHS experience.

The interviews were a critical component to the data collection process. The researcher used a digital recorder and took notes as the interviews were conducted. A set of open-ended questions related to the research questions for this study were asked of each of the students during their one-on-one interview (see Appendices B and C). If a student's answer was vague or unclear, the researcher asked for clarification. Creswell (2005) also recommends the researcher ask "probing" questions that encourage the subject to provide more information. The goal is that the information acquired from the preliminary questionnaire and the interviews answers each of the research questions thoroughly (see Appendix D).

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of qualitative research is important to the design of the study. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) articulate some of the major concerns:

there needs to be some certainty that the internal elements, dimensions, factors, sectors and so on, found within the original data, would recur outside of the study population.....The reliability of the findings depends on the likely recurrence of the original data and the way they are interpreted. (p. 271)

While a small groups of students are the participants for this particular study, numerous students graduating from ECHSs, have similar experiences. In addition, utilizing a theoretical framework, such as Schlossberg's theory on transition, offers a method for interpretation (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

The validity of the results is important in a qualitative study. Creswell (2005) and Ritchie and Lewis (2003) define validity as accuracy of the findings. Ritchie and Lewis

further suggest that the precision of the findings depends on both internal validity (i.e., researching what you claim to be) and external validity (i.e., transferability of the concepts or ideas developed through research). Multiple data sources were used to triangulate the data.. Specifically, interviews and a questionnaire offered multiple sources of data. Also, participant checks were utilized. After the interviews were completed and transcribed, the students were contacted by email to confirm the accuracy of the transcripts and to ask for any additional information or clarification. Miles and Huberman (1994) also recommend some measures for validity, including making the researcher's purpose and intentions clear so as not to influence the site and participants. They recommend that the researcher maintain focus on the research questions and not be misdirected by participants. This will eliminate some bias. The information collected from participants was compared with information made available by the ECHS regarding practices and available services and through staff interviews.

DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis uses collected information to find any emerging themes or patterns that explain a particular experience or phenomena (Creswell, 2005). The next step in this study was the analysis of the data in an effort to determine patterns or themes in the experiences these ECHS graduates had as they adjusted to a four-year college.

Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtler (2006) and Lichtman (2010) outline the steps for data analysis: (1) prepare and organize data, (2) review and explore the data, (3) code the data, (4) describe "people, places, and activities," (5) construct themes, and (6) interpret.

As information was collected through the questionnaire and the two interviews, it was transcribed and manually coded. The process of analyzing qualitative data is inductive, “going from the particular...to the general” (Creswell, 2005, p. 231). Multiple coding steps were used on the data. Utilizing an open coding process helps “make sense” of the data collected by sorting all data into emerging themes (Creswell, 2005). After the data were transcribed, the interview questions and participants’ responses were organized according to the four major research questions to which those research questions applied. Key words and references were highlighted in the student responses to examine emerging themes. Lichtman (2010) recommends this initial list of themes be reexamined to refine and eliminate some of the initial categories before moving to the next step. The data underwent a second round of coding, selective coding, to ascertain the larger themes of the ECHS student experience and transition to a four-year institution. Themes that were similar in nature were categorized together, while some themes were eliminated because of their singularity. The fewer substantial themes are the basis for the discussion section of the study.

SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to gain insight about the transition from high school to college. More specifically, this study focused on ECHS graduates and how different aspects of their unique experience support them in their transition to college. Because this experience was unique, and because the group of students who experienced this

phenomenon was small, qualitative research is the best method to obtain rich and robust data to gain an in-depth understanding of a largely unexamined experience.

The selection of site and participants was purposeful. The Early college high school from which the students graduated has obtained a high success rate in terms of student matriculation to college. The students selected enrolled in college within a semester after completing high school. Students were asked to interview and to complete questionnaires. The hope for these multiple methods for acquiring data is that rich and in-depth information will be provided for analysis.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter outlines the findings of the student interviews, provides a summary of the staff interviews, and describes the challenges of conducting the study. The participants were asked to reflect upon their ECHS experiences and how those experiences helped them with the transition from an ECHS to a four-year institution. An assumption of this study was that these participants were able to accurately reflect upon and describe their experiences and the resources available to them. Though the staff members interviewed for this study were not participants, the information they provided offers confirmation of what the participants reported in their interviews.

The staff of the ECHS offered insights on the student experience and shared their concerns and questions about the support they provided their students. The researcher included these concerns because they provide a platform in the next chapter to discuss implications for practice at the ECHS.

This chapter begins with a brief review of the study, including purpose, research questions, significance, and methodology. For the purpose of anonymity, participants were given pseudonyms. Participant characteristics are summarized and followed by a description of the coding process and the results of the participant questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire and interviews were built to acquire information about ECHS support services, and the preparation for and transition to a four-year institution. The participants were asked to share their recommendations for what would improve

their transition to a four-year institution. This chapter ends by outlining ECHS staff interviews and the challenges of completing this study.

REVIEW OF THE STUDY

Early college high schools (ECHSs) are hybrid secondary/post-secondary institutions designed to help students with the transition from high school to college (Early College High School Initiative, 2008; Early College High School Initiative, 2013). These schools target populations of students underrepresented in higher education and offer those students a high level of academic, social and emotional support (e.g., tutoring, one-on-one meetings, advising, counseling, and professional development) to increase the likelihood that they will enroll in a four-year institutions upon graduation from an ECHS and successfully complete a post-secondary degree.

Purpose

Quantitative studies offer information on student academic success while enrolled in an ECHS and indicate that ECHS graduates are more likely to attend college and graduate (Berger et al., 2010). However, there is limited research on how successful students are after they have graduated from high school and enrolled in a four-year institution (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Valadez, 2013). This study examines the transition of these students to gain a better understanding of whether the support they received at the ECHS helped them with the transition to a four-year college or university.

Research Questions

To understand the effectiveness of academic, social, and emotional support that ECHS policies and programs provide, this research focused on questions related to the ECHS students' assessment of the effect of these supports on their transition to college.

The research questions were:

Research question one: To what degree did the support students receive while enrolled in an ECHS aid in their transition from high school to college?

Research question two: In what ways did students feel prepared for their experiences in college?

Research question three: What aspects of the transition to college did students find most and least challenging?

Research question four: What components of the support structures provided students with an effective understanding of what they would experience once enrolled in college?

Significance

The need for accountability in secondary and post-secondary education has led to an increase in research on educational programs and structures. Practices at both of these levels affect student learning and success and have undergone significant scrutiny in the past decade (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006). New and costly initiatives, such as the ECHSI, are closely examined for their ability to contribute to student academic success and improve graduation rates. Yet, research has not closely examined whether

the experience of these students at the ECHS level helps them with the transition to a four-year institution. By more closely studying the student transition experience and the support provided by ECHSs, this study may provide some insight on the student experience, clarify the needs of students who have experienced accelerated education, and offer direction for student services staff to better serve this growing population of students.

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Four participants agreed to be interviewed for this study. Each of the participants in this study graduated from the same ECHS in Spring 2013 and entered a four-year college or university the following fall semester a full-time student. Their high school GPAs ranged from 2.5 to 3.28. The participants each earned a minimum of 60 hours of college credit while enrolled in high school.

The four-year institutions they attended varied in size and academic support offerings. Two students attended small, private liberal arts institutions. One of these students planned to transfer to a large flagship institution to pursue a degree in engineering, a major not offered at the current institution. The other student was considering transferring to a larger institution to which offered a major not available at the current institution. Two of the participants currently attend regional public institutions and intend to stay at their current institutions. Most of the participants also indicated they participated in orientation and advising activities upon entrance to their receiving

institutions. The students' college GPAs range from 2.5 to 3.8 for the first academic year (see table 1).

Participant	ECHS GPA	College Hours Earned	Receiving Institution Type	First Year GPA	Major
Julia	No Report	70	Mid-size, regional, public	2.57	Athletic Training
Carl	3.28	63	Small, private, liberal arts	3.87	Engineering
Kim	2.5	61	Mid-size, regional, public	2.78	Psychology
Ellen	N/A	N/A	Small, private, liberal arts	N/A	Chemistry

Table 1: Participant Information Table

The researcher would like to note that for one participant, the preliminary questionnaire is missing. The researcher twice contacted to the student to submit the questionnaire, but received no response. Fortunately, this participant provided a significant amount of information during the two interviews, which mostly compensates for the information lost from the questionnaire.

PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE AND INTERVIEW RESULTS

The participants in this study were identified with the assistance of staff at the ECHS from which the students graduated. Once the participants were contacted and agreed to interview and completed their consent form, a preliminary questionnaire was completed, two interviews were conducted and then transcribed, and a follow-up participant check was completed.

The questionnaire and interviews were structured to gather information on ECHS support services and the level of preparation for the participants' transitions to a four-year institution. The questions in the preliminary questionnaire and the interviews were categorized according to the research questions with which they corresponded (see table 2). Responses were sorted based on the research questions and then coded to determine overall themes.

Research Question	Preliminary Questionnaire	Interview 1	Interview 2
1. To what degree did the support students receive while enrolled in an ECHS aid in their transition from high school to college?	1 & 2	1,2, & 8	2 & 3
2. In what ways did students feel prepared for their experiences in college?	3-5	3, 5, 6, & 9	1, 2, & 5
3. What aspects of the transition to college did students find most and least challenging?	5	4, 7, & 8	1
4. What components of the support structures provided students with an effective understanding of what they would experience once enrolled in college?	5 & 6	2	2-6

Table 2: Research and Interview Table

Open coding and subsequent selective coding revealed students experienced academic and personal challenges, and accessed academic support resources and teachers for one-on-one attention. The open coding process uncovered numerous key words referring to concepts or experiences with services or practices that were available to

students while enrolled at the ECHS. Some of these codes were pulled directly from the participant interviews, and other codes were developed by the researcher based on concepts shared in the interviews. The selective coding further revealed tutoring, teachers, and professional development were important types of support. Personal independence and interpersonal conflict challenged them (see table 3).

Table 3: Coding

Open Coding	Selective Coding	Code Description	Frequency
Academic expectations/difficulties, self-actualization, seeking resources	Academic Independence	Students discussed academic difficulties and finding and using resources on their own.	11
Staying on track, time, procrastination	Time Management	Students discussed not being able to manage work in a timely manner.	18
Tutoring others, seeking tutoring, teacher support, professor	Tutoring	Student discussed use of and/or usefulness of one-on-one academic support.	32
Supplemental Instruction, SIs	Supplemental Instruction (SI)	Student discussed use of group academic support.	15
Close monitoring, meeting with teacher, advisory, support recommendations	Advisory	Students discussed advisory class and support.	7
Workload, stress, academic struggles, teacher conflicts	Teacher	Students discussed teacher/principal support and availability.	46
Running errands, paying bills, working, living on own, apartment	Self-Management	Students discussed trouble self-care and responsibility.	6

Self-directed tasks, finding resources, own	Personal Independence	Students discussed learning self-care and challenges managing responsibilities.	35
Roommate conflict, social distraction	Interpersonal Conflict	Students discussed roommate and residence hall distractions.	21
ISM, internship, resume, portfolio, interview, apply	Professional Development	Students discussed class designed to support students during their last two years of high school.	37
Admissions, financial aid, and scholarships	Senior Seminar	Students discussed college preparation, primarily focused on applications.	14
Behavioral expectations, understanding syllabus, knowing resources, professor	Class Structure	Students discussed understanding of the structure and expectations of college coursework.	10

Table 3: Coding

The selective codes were sorted into composite themes: academic challenges, personal challenges, social challenges, academic support, individualized support, and transition support (see table 4). When discussing their level of preparation for enrollment in a four-year institution, participants described their transition in three major contexts: academic, personal and social. The participants discussed their issues of transition at length and offered insight into aspects of the support they received at the ECHS that helped them during their first year at the receiving institution.

Selective Coding	Composite Theme	Theme Description	Frequency
Academic Independence Time Management	Academic Challenge	Includes the ability to manage time and coursework and seek support.	27
Tutoring Supplemental Instruction (SI) Advisory	Academic Support	Includes resources and services students were offered and/or utilized to improve academic performance.	54
Teacher Stress Management Self-Management Personal Independence	Individualized Support	Refers to how teachers addressed academic/personal/social issues.	46
Interpersonal Conflict	Personal Challenge	Includes non-academic issues related to the adjustment to college life.	80
Professional Development Senior Seminar Class Structure	Social Challenge	Refers to social aspects of life. Students focused primarily on roommate conflicts.	21
	Transition Support	Refers to services/practices that supported the student transition, and challenges students experienced.	61

Table 4: Composite Themes

The interviews also gave students the opportunity to provide feedback to their ECHS and their current institution. Because of their insights on the ECHS experience, their recommendations are invaluable and offered direction for the implications section in the next chapter.

Support Services

Participants were asked to identify what support they received as ECHS students, and in what ways those supports were helpful to them as ECHS students and full-time college students. Research questions one and four are centered on identifying the extent

and quality of the support students received. Upon reviewing the transcribed interviews and the preliminary questionnaires, three major support themes emerged. Participants identified individualized support, formal academic support services, and a third category which the researcher defined as transitional support.

Individual Support

During the interviews, participants were asked to discuss what type of support they received from their ECHS. Each of the participants identified individualized support from teachers, counselors, and administrators at their ECHS. Furthermore, they identified this support and the availability and accessibility of ECHS staff as being critical to their academic success as ECHS students.

Participants indicated that their ECHS teachers knew them on a personal level, and were aware of their individual academic abilities and challenges. Julia stated:

My teachers were quite open to me, so honestly they knew my grades. So, they would pull me aside and say, “hey, we have got to work on this certain section.” I would come in [to the classroom] at lunch and take advantage... They were quite helpful. I did see my grades increase over time.

While teachers would directly reach out to students, participants also mentioned that their teachers were accessible to them, and particularly when they needed academic support.

When participants had difficulties with a course or with a specific teacher, they were able to approach ECHS teachers or administrators for tutoring, advice, or counseling.

ECHS teachers served as a resource to students for their college courses. Some participants mentioned being able to talk to their high school teachers about the

challenges they had in their college level courses. Ellen felt comfortable with talking to her high school chemistry teacher about her college chemistry course:

We could just come by practically any time and she would just go on the board and explain everything to us. With that, our teachers were great with helping us with what we didn't understand. And if they couldn't find [an answer], if they didn't know the answer themselves, they would go in their database and find someone who knew and lead us on to the next person.

Some of the participants mentioned they were comfortable with approaching the community college faculty in whose courses they were enrolled. However, at the community college level, the participants mostly used formal academic support services instead of approaching faculty directly.

Most of the participants acknowledged experiencing a high level of stress as they attempted to manage a regimented and demanding high school and college curriculum. Kim credits her high school counselor with helping her maintain her focus, even stating that she “wouldn't have made it through [high school]” without his support. No other students mentioned the use of their high school counselor, and appear to have primarily relied on the one-on-one guidance of their ECHS teachers and administrators.

Overall, the participants emphasized the individualized support they received as being helpful with navigating the academic challenges they faced as ECHS students. Teachers and administrators helped them with managing their coursework by being available to discuss academic issues and by monitoring their academic progress. However, participants mentioned very little about support for the management of stress,

which was an issue for them. Only one participant sought help from the ECHS counselor for this.

Academic Support Services

While students received individualized academic support from their ECHS teachers and their academic progress was regularly monitored, formalized academic support in the form of tutoring, supplemental instruction, math and writing labs, and advisory classes were often used by these participants. Some students were required to use services because of previous academic performance. However, for most of the participants, the use of these services was optional and voluntary.

At the ECHS level, students participated in advisory classes at the start of their day. During this time students took part in various academic and personal enrichment activities and used tutoring. Kim reported being required to utilize the morning tutorials. However, she expressed dissatisfaction with the tutorials, stating she felt she needed more one-on-one support instead of group tutoring. Chris expressed that he did not find the tutorials as helpful as he needed. Rather, he used the math and writing labs available at the community college, and if those did not fulfill his needs, he would work with other students in study groups.

At the community college level, three of the four participants identified supplemental instruction (SI) as one of their main academic support services. For Kim, Ellen, and Julia, SI offered the opportunity to work with and learn from their peers to master the content of their courses. One participant spoke about using the community

college's math and writing labs. No other participants mentioned utilizing the community college learning labs while enrolled at the ECHS.

Overall, the participants seemed knowledgeable about the academic support services available to them at the high school level and the college level. Some of these services, such as tutoring, were built in to their high school advisory classes, and other services, such as SI, students sought on their own. One critical finding from the participants' discussions of these services is that they possessed enough self-awareness to understand what would help them and what would not. Two students indicated that some services were not helpful and they sought assistance through other means, one participant even going so far as to develop study groups on his own.

Transitional Support

Participants were asked to discuss the kind of support and information they received to better understand the transition to a four-year institution. The students described formal and informal mechanisms in place to prepare them for the transition from an ECHS to a four-year college or university. Participants consistently identified their advisory class, their independent study mentor (ISM) class, and their internship as being helpful for understanding the college application process and identifying potential fields of study and careers.

The ISM class was taken their junior and senior years, and helped students understand the college application process and identify a possible career and educational path. Some participants mentioned gaining a better understanding of the Texas Common

Application and the Federal Application for Free Student Aid (FAFSA). One student mentioned this class was invaluable in developing a professional resume and portfolio so she could apply for jobs and internships. Only one student mentioned that he felt the class was not centered enough on college preparation and recommended that the ECHS offer more support and information for students who are preparing to make the transition to a four-year institution.

The ISM class also included internships. The students spent three hours per week for 15 weeks as an intern in a professional area that interested them. The ECHS staff members were aware that when students graduated with a significant amount of college credit, they would have to identify a major and a career path very quickly. These internships helped with that process. One participant describes how she found a career that she loves:

So, when it came to my internship and now applying it to my field, that helped me a lot. What was required of me to improve in the program of my degree plan. So, for internship, I did my first semester in pediatrics. That is when I realized I hated the office space. Kids weren't really my thing, but you know I could get along with them. My second semester my senior year, I [tried another career area]. And that was when I realized I had a love for it.

Throughout her interviews, Julia continued to describe her commitment to and passion for this work. She continues works as a trainer and plans to earn her license so she can work with professional athletes.

Another participant had a similar result with her internship, and described the experience working in a treatment center in a hospital. While she had initially been interested in another area of medicine and completed an internship in that area, when she

served at this treatment center, she “fell in love with it”. These internships appear to be useful to ECHS students, in particular, because of their accelerated pace and need to identify an academic major almost immediately upon their entrance to a four-year institution.

In addition to the ISM class and the internship, participants discussed their advisory class which was taken each morning for the duration of enrollment at the ECHS. During this class, the teachers provided information about the college application process and tips for taking the SAT or ACT, and they helped students research college websites. Participants found these advisory periods helpful for academic issues mostly, but one student stated she benefitted from them by learning more about the college application process.

The formal transitional support for ECHS students is provided through required classes and activities that are centered on how to be academically successful while enrolled in an ECHS and finding a career direction prior to graduation and subsequent enrollment in a four-year institution. While ECHS faculty indicated that the students received academic support, information about applying to college, and career development opportunities, the focus was on the academic support and career development. They valued their internship experience, and credited that experience with finding a career path.

Support Services Summary

The participants in this study identified three major categories of support they received while enrolled in an ECHS: individualized support, academic support services, and transitional support. The ECHS staff and administration were able to develop individual relationships with students, understanding their unique academic needs with the ability to respond quickly to students' academic crises. The participants seemed to rely heavily on the one-on-one interactions they had with ECHS staff to resolve their academic issues but also mentioned utilizing formal academic support services at both the ECHS and community college level. Tutoring and SI services were helpful to the participants, and if anything, familiarized students with the types of services that would be available to them once enrolled in a four-year institution.

Transitional support included ISM classes, career development in the form of an internship, and advisory classes. Participants described the ISM class, and particularly the internship as being very helpful in determining a career path, a necessary step prior to entering a four-year institution, since they would have to identify a major quickly. Upon enrollment, they had nearly half of their college coursework completed, and in some cases had completed most of their core curriculum. As a result, there was little time in the first year before declaring a major and narrowing their career focus. Staff members described providing students with support for the college application process in the ISM class, including reviewing with students the college, financial aid, and scholarship application processes. Kim acknowledged this support in her interview. She said:

They taught us how to use a lot of online websites like Texas Common [Application]. ...I had never heard of that before my senior seminar teacher told us about it. So, I was like, this is awesome because you don't even have to go fill out anything in person. It can all be online...And then they taught us how to do the FAFSA website and they had someone come in and talk to us about...how to get financial aid.

While the number of participants in this study was small, their interviews offered some important information about the support available while enrolled in an ECHS. This section begins to answer the research questions centered on the type of support the participants received and lays the foundation for understanding to what degree individualized, academic, and transitional support aided these students in their academic, personal, and social adjustment to a four-year institution.

Preparation and Transition

The core principles of the ECHSI emphasize preparing students for success in a four-year institution after graduation from an ECHS (www.earlycolleges.org, 2013). Currently, the research on the transition to a four-year institution and how ECHS graduates fared with the adjustment to college is limited. The preliminary questionnaire and interview questions asked students to reflect on their first year at a four-year university, specifically the challenges and their preparation to handle college work.

As participants described their experiences during their first year of enrollment at a four-year institution, several themes emerged. Most of what they shared about their transition to college centered on their academic experiences, but they also offered insight into their personal experiences with the transition to college and their social adjustment to the four-year college environment. For Carl that adjustment was unexpected. He thought

attending college away from home “would be something like a summer camp.” Instead he had to learn how to manage his time and studies, and cope with a difficult roommate. Like Carl, Kim faced social challenges in the residence halls. She was easily “distracted and [could] end up having a 30-minute conversation instead of studying.” Overall, participants revealed an understanding of how colleges worked and what resources were available to them, showed significant drive and focus toward graduation and beginning a career, and indicated personal challenges, most significantly issues related to stress and social adjustment. The following sections outline the participants’ academic, personal, and social transition experiences at a four-year institutions, parsing out what aspects of the ECHS experience helped or did not help with navigating their transition.

Academic Transition

Participants were asked what aspects of college life they felt prepared to manage and what aspects challenged them the most. They revealed they felt prepared for their academic experience. Participants understood the structure of college courses and materials, the expectations and standards for behavior when interacting with faculty and classmates, and the academic resources available to them on their respective campuses. Some of this “college knowledge” can be attributed to the support they received as ECHS students, and much of it can be attributed simply to having prior exposure to college life as community college students. Julia identified an understanding of how her courses would work:

I knew what to expect due to being in college courses for four years of my life. I knew how to study, the responsibility it takes to pass a course, and to maintain a

good relationship with your instructor, and that communication is key in the classroom.

For this participant, having four years of exposure to college courses prior to entering her current university helped her understand quickly what was necessary to succeed as a college student. Ellen expressed the importance of understanding behavioral expectations in an academic environment and attributed that understanding to attending high school on a community college campus:

In high school, I was immediately thrown onto a college campus... And that taught me right away how to properly conduct myself in public, you know?...The college kids always looked down on us because they didn't like that we broke the [grading] curves...And then, you know, they looked at us like we are spoiled rotten brats. We are basically getting a free education and they didn't appreciate us being there. So if you could perform and look like a college kid and if they can't tell you were a high school student, you were good.

Other participants expressed that they felt more mature than other students and better able to interact with faculty and understand what was expected of them in the college environment. Some attributed this to their teachers providing them with instruction on what to expect and how to behave, while others mentioned having exposure to the college environment. Julia said:

The easiest thing was applying myself in my classes because I knew what I had to do. For instance, taking notes: Making sure if I needed my computer to take notes with a faster talking teacher. Basically analyzing how I had to approach my class.

Academic support was used by each of these students during their first year. They utilized some combination of SI, tutoring services, and faculty or TA office hours. Some participants developed their own study groups and helped tutor other students. The

participants did not attribute their use of these services to a specific experience as ECHS students, but after four years of exposure to a college environment appeared to know what resources were available to them and how to use those resources. All of the participants engaged in the same combination of practices at both the ECHS level and the four-year institution level. These participants were given information about academic support services as entering first-year students at their four-year institutions, but seemed to have an awareness and habit of seeking assistance. Practicing using these services may have contributed to their inclination to utilize support during their first year.

All of the participants indicated an understanding of the academic environment and expectations they would experience upon entrance into a four-year institution. Whether by means of ECHS instruction about what to expect as full-time college students, or by means of exposure by enrolling in courses at a community college, the participants knew how their college courses were structured, how to behave among faculty and students, and how to find or develop their own academic support.

Personal Transition

As described in the academic support section, the participants were fully aware of their academic expectations and resources and knew what would be required of them in terms of fulfilling academic demands and showing a mature and professional demeanor in class. Participants shared their thoughts on their personal transition to the four-year environment and discussed how they coped with the changes in their personal lives. Some of their more significant challenges fell in this category and included issues related

to stress, time management, and learning independence. For the most part, each of the participants had similar experiences, with some being more challenged by time management and stress than others. Also, the information provided by the participants indicated a rather high level of resilience and ability to respond to challenges productively and continue as successful students.

Participants spoke of the challenges of moving out of their parents' home and establishing their own residence. Each of the participants lived in on-campus residence halls during their first semester at a four-year institution. After that, two continued to live in the residence halls for the rest of their first year; the other two moved to off-campus apartments. Participants acknowledged the importance of managing their independence.

Ellen discussed the experience of moving from home and what challenged her:

The hardest [part of the transition to college] was probably the living farther away from home. Even though [while I was an ECHS student] I was doing both the college and high school experience at the same time, I was still living at home...I felt independent, but I wasn't as independent yet. You know? Because I was trying to do college things and yet I was still being coddled.

This student continued to describe how she learned to care for herself, including cleaning her apartment and maintaining a balanced diet. While this was the most challenging aspect of her transition to a four-year institution, she noted that learning how to manage her life and her responsibilities was her biggest accomplishment.

Other participants expressed similar views on the transition to a four-year university. Carl described his expectation that college life would be different, and especially the challenges of being away from his family. He noted that the amount of

freedom he had was surprising, but even with having more freedom as a full-time college student, it was important to possess “discipline to focus on your studies and succeed.” Some participants were challenged more by this freedom. Kim discussed the need to “readapt pretty much [her] entire life.” When asked for clarification, she described social issues including adjusting to having a roommate and living in a residence hall with too much stimulation and activity. For her, high school was low-key and she remained focused on her school work. Once at the four-year institution, she needed to adjust to the noise of her hall mates and “drama” of their lives. She observed that learning how to live independently was empowering:

...the independence was really nice. It kind of empowers you to be out on your own and you are all that you have to depend on...to get to class on time. I have to make sure I eat...breakfast, lunch and dinner. I have to make sure I study because no one is there to be like, “Hey, you need to do that. “ And although that can be challenging it is also really nice because you are like, “Hey, I can do this.”

Another participant emphasized her issues with confidence and time management. As an ECHS student, Julia was accustomed to the structure of her classes and the support she received from staff and administrators. She said:

In high school you are so used to that holding of the hand factor. They are like, “Okay, tomorrow is so and so project. You have got to do this and this and this.” In college, they give it to you two weeks ahead of time and they say, “Hey, two weeks. Nothing more, nothing less. Got questions? Come to me.”

As a full-time student at a four-year institution, she said that she was not challenged by the coursework and understood her academic responsibilities. However, she had a difficult time with procrastination and managing her study time and was worried that she

would not accomplish her academic and professional goals. In her first year, Julia failed her anatomy class, but she reenrolled in the course for the summer and has recalibrated her study and time management habits to improve her grade.

Kim noted similar issues with time management. She acknowledged the fast pace of her classes and when she was not cautious during her first year, she would forget about homework or tasks. For her, this created a significant amount of stress. Kim stated she needed more help with and information on managing her time and planning her coursework as she began her studies at a four-year institution. The two remaining participants, Carl and Ellen, learned quickly how to plan their coursework and respond to the demands of a four-year institution. Neither acknowledged that their initial struggle with time management affected their academic performance or personal life.

Based on the interviews of these students, time management was a critical skill for their success at a four-year institution. Some students learned this skill with ease, while others faced more academic and personal challenges in mastering these skills. Another theme regarding transition to life at a four-year institution was stress. The four participants shared they faced stress during their first year as full-time students. Most indicated this was something they expected, and all shared they had experienced a very high level of stress as ECHS students, trying to manage their coursework and the high academic expectations placed upon them by the ECHS staff and administrators. One participant reported being very stressed. Kim disclosed seeking help from her institution's counseling center to manage stress and the adjustment to college:

I pretty much immediately looked into the counseling services because I felt like emotional support would be really important for me my first year of college because it was such a big change and everything. I scheduled an appointment to make sure, check on everything. And I would go and tell them how I am adjusting to everything and they would give me tools to deal with [stress].

She mentioned receiving limited support and information about stress management as an ECHS student, but wished she had been given better training and tools to cope with stress. At the four-year institution, she learned specific strategies to deal with her high stress levels and has found those strategies very helpful in reducing stress.

Overall, the participants faced typical personal challenges associated with the transition to college life (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). They described gaining independence, learning how to manage their lives and their time, and coping with stress. For some, the adjustment happened quickly with little effect on their academic performance. For others, the adjustment was more complicated. However, the participants who fell in the latter category reflected on what needed to be changed and/or what resources were available to help them. The students did not specifically attribute awareness of their resources to what they had been taught or provided at the ECHS, rather wished they had been given more information and provided with a better understanding of what they would experience as full-time students at a four-year institution.

Social Transition

As the participants reflected upon and discussed their adjustment to the four-year college environment, they revealed significant experiences related to their social

adjustment. Each participant expressed enjoying the social aspects of college life and quickly became engaged on their college campus. But they noted that their initial adjustment was challenging and they were not prepared for the social aspect of their experience as college students. The social transition to a four-year institution differed for each participant. One student had problems managing conflict with his roommate, another felt she had allowed herself to be used and trusted others too much, another participant had a difficult time sharing her living space, and the remaining participant described being overstimulated and distracted by the social aspect of her environment. They all stated they eventually dealt with and adjusted to the challenges over the course of their first year.

Getting involved. Each of the participants became involved on their respective four-year campus in different ways. Kim noted the importance of being involved in a variety of activities, and not just those related to a major. She participated in intramural sports and was involved in theatre during her first year. For another participant, some of his involvement and social activities were built into his participation in a service academy preparatory program. Carl noted the difference between the social environment in an ECHS and his current social environment. Physical fitness and training were a required aspect of his program. He “had to wake up at five in the morning for physical training, and [got] close to [his classmates]” because of their shared, challenging experience.

This program allowed him to be a part of a community on his college campus and was not his only type of involvement. Carl participated in Toastmasters and noted his

involvement in this organization helped him socially. He had opportunity to speak with others, talk about his interests, and listen to what other individuals in his organization said.

Ellen described being involved as an ECHS student and continuing to participate in student government and community service as a full-time college student:

I have branched out a lot. I [was involved in student organizations] during my high school life. I started the Christian club at my ECHS. I was in student body government. I was in National Honor Society because that was important to have on your resume. I was in a lot of student organizations but I couldn't commit a lot of time...but now I can focus on what I want to do. I am in Student Government Association. I am in [a service group], where we help people in the community.

She continued to explain that her involvement was helpful for her career path in medicine. Another student described her involvement on campus as directly related to her professional development and career.

Julia's plans to become a professional athletic trainer included working for a number of her athletic teams as a student trainer. At length, she described her role in helping student-athletes heal from injuries and regain mobility, often within a short time span. Mostly significantly, she discussed her relationship with the graduate assistant trainers who supervised and mentored her as helpful in dealing with her confidence issues. She was not involved in any other type of activities or organizations; And she indicated she has limited time in her schedule because of her work with student-athletes, and prefers to stay focused on her career.

Overall, the participants found social outlets at their respective institutions. Some students sought out involvement, while for others, their involvement was connected to

their chosen academic programs or career path. Regardless, participating in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities benefited the students by providing them with a greater understanding of their field of study, stress relief, or moral support from peers during high-stress activities. Each student had varying levels of extra-curricular and co-curricular involvement at the ECHS. However, they did not attribute their current involvement to their previous experience at an ECHS. In fact, Kim stated she wished there had been more opportunity to be involved in activities at the ECHS.

Social adjustment. Another aspect of the social transition to a four-year institution was the interactions students had with friends and acquaintances. Though these students had previous post-secondary experience and will finish their studies within a few years of completing high school, they were faced with the same type of social adjustment issues other entering first-year college students. The biggest issues were building trusting relationships and adjusting to sharing their physical living space.

Ellen described having a difficult time with her newly formed friendships during her first year:

I was very trusting and even though this is a ... campus you just learn that you can't be as trusting with some people... There was a time, actually, half way through the fall semester when I just wanted to leave. I couldn't take it because I was pressured...[by] people. People were constantly asking for my help and I was trying to do my own thing and it got to the point where I needed to learn how to balance.

She described experiences with friends and roommates, noting that though she was kind and helpful to them, they took advantage of her. Ellen further noted her disappointment and discouragement in being treated this way. However, upon meeting a friend who

connected her with individuals she could befriend and trust her attitude toward her college experience changed. She learned to enjoy spending time with friends and meeting new people. The description of this situation dominated much of her interviews and appears to be a critical point in her college experience in which she learned how to manage her social and emotional challenges with some resilience. Though Ellen was discouraged by her experience, she continued to engage with the people around her, eventually making new friends. She and other students demonstrated an ability recover from challenging experiences, a quality that may come from their previous experience at the ECHS.

Ellen is not the only student to encounter and rebound from social challenges. While other participants did not describe having difficulty with developing friendships, two students noted they struggled with living in the residence halls. Julia and Kim described being challenged by the loudness and distraction of having roommates and hall mates. They felt their academic performance and their ability to manage and balance their schoolwork suffered from their experiences. Both resolved these issues by moving into off-campus apartments.

Carl described his roommate conflict and resolution in more detail:

My roommate and I during the past year had very different learning styles. He was very rowdy. But he still made a 4.0 every semester and he would watch movies all the time. He would blast music and he was able to make a 4.0 and I had no idea how to concentrate while he was in the room.

When asked about how the issue was resolved, he said he had a few outbursts and yelled at his roommate, but by the end of the semester, they were “good” with each other and managed to sort out their issues.

Overall, the social transition from an ECHS to a four-year institution was one of the most challenging these students have faced. Each student participated in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities, by seeking out opportunities or because they were a part of their degree plan. The social adjustment for these students, and their ability to develop friendships, manage conflict, and share personal space reveals a lack of preparedness for the social aspect of their transition to a four-year institution. For each of these students, the social challenges they faced were unexpected. Some directly faced issues, while others moved away from their stressors. Regardless, each student recovered from these challenges.

The academic, personal, and social transition from an ECHS to a four-year institution was in some ways easy for these students, and simultaneously challenging. Overall, the students felt prepared by their ECHS experience for the academic expectations and challenges they would face. Early exposure to college class structures and college academic resources helped these students know the course structure, how to interact with faculty and other students, and how to find help they needed to perform well in class. Yet, participants still indicated they experienced some academic challenges, but described taking positive action to resolve these issues, including utilizing academic

support, and self-assessing to determine how best to change their study habits to improve their course grades.

For these participants, though, the personal and social transition to life at a four-year institution was far more challenging. They each experienced issues related to stress and confidence and were challenged in their social interactions with their peers. Each of the participants indicated they were not prepared for these types of challenges as well as they should have been and wished their ECHS had done more to inform them of what they would experience in this regard. Eventually, though, each of the participants was able to cope with the personal and social challenges. They sought out resources and assessed their situations to determine a solution that would not interfere with their academic lives.

The participants' ability to cope with personal, academic and social challenges is significant. Within the scope of this study, the students' ability to manage stressful experiences cannot be completely ascribed to the ECHS experience. But, there appears to be a connection between these students' greater academic purpose and their ability to manage and resolve any issues that threaten that purpose. This demonstrated resilience is a characteristic worth further exploration in future research.

PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS

Students were asked to provide recommendations for both the ECHS and current institution. These ECHS recommendations center on the academic, personal and social adjustment to a four-year institution, while recommendations for current four-year

institutions center on having a better understanding of their educational circumstances and accommodating their unique characteristics and needs.

ECHS Recommendations

Participants provided recommendations for the ECHS that address personal and social transition support and academic issues at the ECHS. Ellen suggested that ECHSs limit the curriculum to one style. She felt she had to approach her high school coursework differently than her college coursework, and that could be challenging and stressful. She identified standardized testing as part of the issue, because she felt that type of testing dictated the format of her high school classwork. She further mentioned that standardized testing schedules interfered with her college level courses. To participate in required standardized exams, she missed class at the community college and spent additional time catching up on what she missed.

Other students focused more on academic transition issues, identifying that it is critical for faculty and administrators to help students to identify an academic and career focus by the time they enter a four-year institution. Julia felt prepared and ready for a career choice, but she was concerned that some ECHS peers did not:

One thing is just helping kids have a secure foundation of what they want to study. A lot of my classmates did have difficulty still you know, even though we spent two semesters trying to figure out what we wanted to do...Just help them get a better foundation of what they want so they won't be second guessing themselves.

She mentioned that students left or transferred out of their institutions because they were struggling with this issue.

Another participant suggested the ECHS encourage students to take community college classwork that would align more with the core curriculum and requirements of four-year institutions. Carl said “if he had known [how ECHS credits would apply], he would have definitely taken more classes during his junior and senior year [of high school] that were more applicable.” This student recommended the ECHS offer more “life skills” support during the last two years of ECHS enrollment, instead of earlier in his ECHS experience. Kim concurred with this need and identified a need for training on time management:

I think that if they maybe helped us actually set up plans on how much time to spend on each [task]. Like, give us a guideline, rather than just throw us in the mix of all the work...I think that would have helped me personally because I was doing all this work and didn't know where to start really.

Overall, the students' recommendations for their ECHS focused on what would either improve their academic experience at the high school level or the transition between the ECHS and their four-year institutions. Outside of the academic experience, students mentioned needing better support for time management and more training on “life skills” for when they were on their own after leaving home.

Four-year Institution Recommendations

All participants shared a critical complaint and recommendation for their current institutions: to better understand and accommodate the experience and prior academic achievement of ECHS students. Kim's assessment of her institution's understanding of her previous educational experience speaks to that of her fellow participants. She states that administrators “should acknowledge the fact that you have already got two years

done, and it really changes the dynamic of your degree plan” and that they should be more sympathetic to that experience and provide ECHS graduates with resources geared more toward realizing their professional potential after graduating with a four-year degree. Julia faced challenges with transferring 70 hours of college credit to her four-year institution. She stated the institution had difficulties with classifying her and matching her courses to their own core curriculum. She said:

It was really scary for me to hear that they weren’t going to make me “core complete,” you know. I struggled so hard for all those classes and they were like, ‘oh, well, you might have to take this class again...I felt so lost, I didn’t even know what to do.’”

She resolved her course issues by finding an advisor who was helpful and considerate of her circumstances. Carl and Ellen faced the same complications with transferring course, placing significant time and energy into working with their current institutions to make sure their courses would transfer.

The students were frustrated with and discouraged by their receiving institutions’ reluctance to transfer courses from the ECHS. Because these students are from populations that are less likely to complete a four-year degree, colleges and universities need to work to decrease the risk of losing these students by improving the protocol for advising them and transferring their coursework.

Overall, the participants provided insightful suggestions for both their ECHS and current institutions. These were centered on providing an improved academic experience at both the ECHS and four-year institution and improving the type and timing of guidance students receive for the personal and social transition they would experience

during their first year. These suggestions confirm findings in this study that while participants felt mostly prepared for their academic experience at a four-year institution, they were not as prepared for the logistics or the personal and social challenges they would experience.

STAFF INTERVIEWS

Staff and administrators at the participants' ECHS were interviewed for their insight on the ECHS student experience and to describe the school's practices. They confirmed the services and classes offered to students. ECHS staff and administrators were also given the opportunity to share their thoughts regarding the ECHS student experience.

Staff members and administrators expressed a strong belief in the benefit of the ECHS and their work to support their students, but they discussed concerns and struggles with ensuring their students are fully supported in their transition to a four-year institution. Further, they expressed the need for a better system for tracking their graduates to determine if they received their four-year degree after all. One teacher spoke to the frustration of being able to track their students after graduation:

I just wish that we could have a better way of finding out where they have been and what they are doing. Just because we want to know for ourselves because we put so much blood, sweat, and tears into helping them get where they are.

This staff member said many of her former students were very accomplished and she wanted to follow up on their educational experience. The school principal mentioned the challenge of tracking the students. Though one staff member manages a social media

alumni group for the ECHS, the staff and principal want a better method for tracking the students. The principal emphasized the amount of time, energy and care they invest their students' success and that they do not want to "throw the students out there" to just struggle.

Another reason to track students is the question of the level of support and guidance provided to ECHS students and if that support is a help or a hindrance to student success at a four-year institution. Staff members said they closely monitored their students' academic progress and responded quickly to academic issues by providing students with additional support and resources to improve their academic performance. However, some staff members have stated that they find that students they have helped the most have not performed well academically at four-year institutions and usually leave without a degree. One teacher said:

I begin to look at all the kids that we have sent out to these colleges...It was almost like the harder we worked to get [a] kid through our program and into a college, the faster they came out of the college without a degree...I think there has been a correlation. And I am just now beginning to see it a little bit.

Each teacher echoed this concern. Some worry that there is too much of a focus on helping these students earn high grades at the expense of learning personal accountability and independence.

The issue of tracking students is a significant problem for these schools in large part because they cannot assess students' post-graduation success to determine if they have improved their students' academic potential and increased the likelihood they will graduate with a four-year or a graduate degree. The ECHS staff and administrators

interviewed for this project expressed hope that continued research on the ECHS student experience will precipitate the development of a program or system that will allow them to track the educational trajectory of their graduates with the intention of using that information to improve their services, and more fully understand if the support they have provided has been effective for the adjustment to a four-year institution.

STUDY CHALLENGES

The challenges of completing this study warrant mention. The researcher attempted to contact each ECHS in the state that had graduated at least one class of students. Most attempts did not receive a response. One attempt was received with hostility, with the principal of one ECHS saying she did not understand why the researcher would conduct such a study and expect an ECHS staff member or graduate would have any motivation to participate. When the researcher spoke to staff at Educate Texas, they mentioned that finding an ECHS to participate would be challenging. This study focuses on an aspect of the ECHS student experience that remains unexamined. Specifically, most of these schools are unable to track their graduates, and are more focused on helping these students graduate from high school. While understanding students' transition experience and success once enrolled in a four-year institution is important to these schools, they appear to not have the resources they need to do so.

SUMMARY

For this study, four student participants completed a preliminary questionnaire, and were interviewed twice to learn more about their experience as ECHS students and

how that experience influenced their transition to a four-year institution. The participants identified three major support types: individualized support, academic support services, and transitional support. Within these types, both formal and informal mechanisms were in place to ensure students' academic success at the ECHS level and help them understand what they would experience and what would be expected of them once they enrolled in four-year institution. The participants described their academic, personal, and social transition to their current schools and revealed that the support they received as ECHS students mostly helped them with their academic transition. They indicated significant struggles with and lack of preparation for the personal and social transition and shared that their ECHS could improve and change how it readies students for those aspects of college life.

In addition to ECHS graduates, ECHS staff members were interviewed to learn more about how the ECHS was structured and the types of programs that were in place to support the participants. These staff members confirmed the types of services and support provided to students and shared their concerns regarding the tracking of their graduates. They would like to know more about their students' academic achievements and if they were able to earn a post-secondary degree. They also want to know if the support they gave their students has helped them with their adjustment to college life. The inability to track these students has been a hindrance for them. If part of their mission is to support the student transition to a four-year institution and they have no

data, they cannot assess if they are fulfilling their mission. They want feedback and accountability.

The inability to track students may have caused the problems with locating a site. Numerous institutions were contacted and few responses were received by the researcher. A conversation with a school administrator and with staff from Educate Texas revealed that tracking students is a concern for these schools. These concerns are discussed at greater length in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This final chapter serves three major purposes. It summarizes the study, offers a synthesis of the findings described in the previous chapter, and discusses implications for research and practice at ECHSs and the four-year institutions. The chapter begins with a brief description of the study, outlining the purpose, problem statement, research questions and significance, which is followed by a brief review of the findings. These findings are discussed within the theoretical framework, in the context of the research questions, and in relation to how they align with the findings in current ECHS literature, and what they offer to the body of literature and research. The chapter continues with a discussion of implications centered on improving support for the certain aspects of the academic transition, and the personal and social transition to a four-year institution, and closes with a brief summary of the study.

REVIEW OF THE STUDY

Early college high schools (ECHSs) offer underrepresented student populations the opportunity to earn a significant amount of college credit while enrolled in high school (Early College High School Initiative, 2008; 2013). These schools provide a supportive and specialized environment, engaging students with resources to improve their academic success with the expectation they will enroll and graduate from a four-year institution.

Problem Statement

The Early college high school initiative (ECHSI) is in its first decade of existence. The number of ECHSs has increased exponentially in the last few years, and research on the effectiveness of these schools and the student academic outcomes is still limited. Quantitative research has examined student academic outcomes and has determined that ECHS students are more likely to attend college (Berger et al., 2010). However, little research examines the student experience once enrolled in a four-year institution. This is problematic because one of the core principles of the ECHSI centers on helping students with the transition to a four-year institution and providing them with the tools and resources they need to attain a post-secondary degree. ECHS performance related to this principle has not been evaluated. Examining factors that affect ECHS graduates' transition to four-year institutions may provide both ECHSs and post-secondary institutions with a more accurate picture of the student experience and their needs, so they may be better supported. In addition, the ECHS student experience warrants further exploration, because of the age of these students and the lack of research on the long-term impact of completing college early and competing against older students in the classroom.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to begin to examine the ECHS student experience post-graduation and during their first year of enrollment in a four-year institution. This study is exploratory and is designed to further elucidate issues and highlight areas in need of

continued examination. While current research focuses on graduation rates and matriculation to post-secondary institutions, the student experience has been largely ignored. ECHS graduates who completed their first year at a four-year institution participated in this study, and were asked to share their perceptions of the support they received in an ECHS. These responses were examined to understand the factors that affected their transition, learn more about the support they received, and gauge student preparation for the transition to a four-year institution.

Significance

Both the quality of the educational experience and students' educational attainment has experienced increased scrutiny in the last several years (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voetgle, 2006). New and innovative practices have been developed to respond to deficiencies in education. ECHSes are an example of a new practice designed to improve the student experience, and provide high school students with the tools they need to be academically successful in college (Early College High School Initiative, 2013). This study is designed to examine the student ECHS experience and understand the factors that affect the student transition from an ECHS to a four-year institution. By exploring this transition and the student experience, this study offers insight into the transition to a four-year institution and student needs during this transition, and ultimately, possible directions for future research and practice to improve support services for these students.

Methodology

This qualitative case study explores the ECHS student experience with the aim of identifying new directions for research. This format was used because of this study's focus on a bounded system (Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle, 2006; Cresswell, 2005). This bounded system includes a limited number of people with a unique experience who can be interviewed during a limited period of time. Students who graduated from an ECHS and were experiencing the transition to a four-year institution were used for this study.

Identifying a site was a challenge for this study, as numerous ECHSes were contacted with little or no response. The ECHS that agreed to participate in this study is located in a large metropolitan area and is situated on a campus of a large community college. The researcher interviewed ECHS staff members to learn more about the site and to ask for help with identifying students. An ECHS staff member contacted former students and provided a list of names of students willing to participate. The researcher contacted this list of students and four were willing to participate.

The students were first sent a consent form and preliminary questionnaire. Each of the students then participated in two interviews. Interviews with open-ended questions were utilized because they allowed the participants to voice their concerns and share information about their experience that they may not have shared otherwise.

After the interviews were transcribed, they were coded. An initial open coding process was used to provide order to the data. A second round of coding, selective coding, was then used to refine the codes and form overarching themes of the study (Cresswell, 2005).

Research Questions

This study examines whether or not the support students received at an ECHS helped them in their transition to life at a four-year institution. The questionnaire and interviews conducted with the participants gained a better understanding of the support they received at the ECHS and their level of preparation for their transition to a four-year institution. The following section will address the four main research questions of this study.

The first research question was, “To what degree did the support the students received while enrolled in an ECHS aid in their transition from high school to college?” Participants identified receiving individualized support from ECHS teachers and administrators, utilizing academic support services such as tutoring, supplemental instruction, and advisory classes, and receiving transitional support in the form of an independent study mentoring (ISM) class and teacher and required internships to develop professionally and identify an educational and career focus. The participants communicated that their ISM class and their internship were most helpful to them as they made the transition to college life. Specifically, it was through these transitional supports that they were able to identify a career and major to focus on in a four-year program. Students with greater focus and direction tended to have an easier time with the

adjustment to college. Also, transition research indicated that individuals who had a greater purpose negotiated and managed the challenges of transition (Anderson et al., 2012).

When they discussed other services, such as academic support, advisory classes, and individual support, they did not directly connect the use of those supports as ECHS students with their transition to a four-year institution. They discussed how these services and support benefited them during their time as ECHS students. However, this does not mean they did not receive transitional benefit from utilizing this support while in high school. The participants felt prepared academically, and credited having previous experience with taking college courses and being students on a college campus with helping them better understand the skills and behaviors necessary to be academically successful. It is possible that by early exposure to support services and having a higher level of contact with teachers, these students felt more comfortable with utilizing academic support services once enrolled in a four-year institution. This is an area that will benefit from continued research to determine more clearly if this early introduction to college-level academic support increases ECHS students' likelihood of utilizing support once enrolled in a four-year institution.

In summary, the participants received several forms of support, some of which they identified as helpful to their transition to a four-year institution. Most of the participants said both their ISM class and internship helped them with identifying a purpose and focus for their studies at a four-year institution. Also, while students did not

directly connect individual and academic support to their adjustment to college, they discussed being exposed to a college campus earlier in their education helped them understand their academic responsibilities as students and what kind of behavior and effort were necessary to be academically successful. Participants' transition challenges were centered on social and personal issues. For this aspect of their transition, students stated they were not ready and wished they had been given more support.

Research question two, "In what ways did students feel prepared or not prepared for their experience in college?" served the purpose of more closely examining what experiences or issues students were prepared to address. Participants indicated they were most prepared for their academic experience in a four-year institution. ECHS students experienced a high level of exposure to the college environment prior to their entrance into a four-year institution. This exposure provided an understanding of class structure and available resources, and how to identify and address academic issues like procrastination and using course-appropriate study strategies.

The areas students were not as prepared for were the social and personal transition to a four-year institution. Most of the participants experienced social challenges in the form of interpersonal conflicts, and personal challenges related to time management and stress. They wished they had been given more guidance in these areas prior to their entrance into a four-year institution. All of the participants were not prepared for how their four-year institution would manage the transfer of their courses. The participants were told their classes may not transfer or they would have to retake courses or take

additional courses. They negotiated advisors and administrators to ensure they would receive credit for their ECHS courses. In spite of these struggles these students showed resilience in managing their respective issues, and found the support they needed or resolve their challenges on their own.

Research question three, “What aspects of the transition to a four-year institution did students find most and least challenging?”, is similar to research question two in that both sought a deeper understanding of student academic, personal, and social transition issues. This research question examines what challenged the students as they adjusted to college life.

Participants described lacking self-confidence, having roommate conflicts, developing friendships, being away from home, and managing time and stress. These are primarily personal and social issues that students felt they were not prepared to address prior to their entrance into a four-year institution. Participants said they were least challenged by academic aspects of their transition. That is, they understood the structure of their courses and their resources, even if they were challenged by the coursework itself.

The responses to research question three indicate that participants faced more significant and challenging personal and social issues than academic issues, aligning with the finding of research question two. This finding triangulated the responses to the research questions and parse out specific challenges participants faced.

Research question four was, “What components of the support structures provide students with an effective understanding of what they would experience once they enrolled in college?” It examines what qualities or practices within the support structures and services were most helpful to students. Participants consistently described that they knew how their college courses would work, how they were supposed to behave and class, and what resources were available at a four-year institution. Participants attributed this to their previous experience at an ECHS. Overall, exposure to the college environment prior to entering college appeared to help these students with their academic adjustment to a four-year institution.

Though only four ECHS graduates participated in this study, they provided a greater understanding of their experiences. Based on the participant responses, ECHSs offered a significant amount of academic support to students that positively influenced their academic adjustment to a four-year institution. Students described receiving individual support, utilizing academic support services, and participating in classes, internships, and activities that equipped them with the tools they needed succeed academically at a four-year institution. They consistently described their ISM class, internship, and general exposure to college-level coursework and the college environment, as being the helpful to them once they became full-time students at their current universities.

While these participants felt prepared for the academic transition, they struggled with social and personal transition issues. Each participant described various conflicts

with roommates and friends, and also talked about issues related to time management, procrastination, stress management, and confidence. For some of these issues, students said they wished their ECHS had provided them with more support and awareness that they may experience these types of challenges once they entered a four-year institution.

The findings indicated that students received significant amounts of individualized support and one-on-one interaction with staff. They had access to, and used academic support services like tutoring and Supplemental Instruction (SI), and received transitional support in the form of independent study classes and internships. Overall, students were more prepared for their academic transition and were least prepared for their social and personal transition to a four-year institution.

The ECHS staff members were also interviewed. ECHSs contacted either did not respond or responded negatively to communication from the researcher. Some of this reluctance may have come from their inability to track students, which ECHS staff confirmed was an issue. While they utilized informal mechanisms to track alumni, they said there was no formal system. The ECHS staff also indicated they were concerned they may be providing too much support to their students, hindering the development of personal accountability and their ability to problem solve and resolve their own issues. The next section of this chapter will further discuss these findings as they relate to the theoretical framework and the ECHS literature.

FINDINGS AND ECHS LITERATURE

National, state, and local reports detailing the effectiveness of the ECHSI, the retention and matriculation of ECHS students and indicate that ECHSs are important mechanisms through which the achievement gap between high-performing and low-performing students can be reduced. These publications indicate that ECHS students achieve greater levels of academic success by scoring well on standardized exams, earning college credit, and graduating from high school (Berger et al., 2009; Berger et al., 2013; Kuo, 2010).

Peer-reviewed studies examined student academic and social support in the ECHS environment, the ECHS culture, and how ECHSs worked with partnering institutions. The focus of this study was to learn more about ECHS student success and academic performance up to the point of graduation. The research indicated that academic support and a culture of accountability were important to students (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011; Smith & Zhang, 2009). Further, the partnership between the high school and community college or university influenced the student experience and student preparation for enrollment in a four-year institution (Berger et al., 2009; Jobs for the Future, 2011; Young et al., 2010). These factors may contribute to overall academic success and ability to complete a high school degree and move on to a four-year institution.

The current ECHSI and ECHS-specific research provided information on the structure and implementation of ECHSs in the context of student performance. These

studies commonly utilized the core principles of the ECHSI initiative as a framework.

The principles are:

Core principle one: Early college schools are committed to serving students underrepresented in higher education.

Core principle two: Early college schools are created and sustained by a local education agency, a higher education institution, and the community, all of whom are jointly accountable for student success.

Core principle three: Early college schools and their higher education partners and community jointly develop and integrated academic program so all students earn one to two years of transferable college credit leading to college completion.

Core principle four: Early college schools engage students in a comprehensive support system that develops academic and social skills as well as the behaviors and conditions necessary for college completion.

Core principle five: Early college schools and their higher education and community partners work with intermediaries to create conditions and advocate for supportive policies that advance the early college movement.
(www.earlycolleges.org, 2008)

Using the principles, the studies focus primarily on quantitative data to determine student outcomes and institutional effectiveness (Berger et al, 2010; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). A major criticism of the research is the focus on the student academic experience at an ECHS. This leaves a significant gap in understanding the ECHS student experience, and the quality and type of support they received and how that support helped them with the transition to a four-year institution (McDonald & Farrell, 2012). If the ultimate goal of the ECHSI is to help these students receive a post-secondary degree, more research must examine the long-term effectiveness of these institutions. Though ECHS research has increased in the past several years, these limitations still exist.

The aim of this study was to examine the ECHS student experience and assess how the different mechanisms of support at the ECHS level have helped students with their transition to a four-year institution. The findings of this study align with previous research and highlight the gaps in our knowledge of ECHSs related to the student transition experience.

Alignment with Current Research

Current research on ECHSs and the ECHSI examined student success and the mechanisms of support in place that help students with completing their high school degree (Young et al., 2010). Recent national, state and local reports indicated the ECHSI had been successful in improving student academic performance and success (Berger et al., 2013; Jobs for the Future, 2011). Specifically, these studies emphasized that the relationship between ECHSs and partnering institutions was critical for creating a college-going culture in which staff members and administrators used instructional practices and techniques that encouraged students to collaborate, adopt college student academic behaviors, and hold themselves to high standards (Young et. al., 2010). While ECHS students were challenged to “rise to the occasion” and adopt these college-going attitudes, they were provided with significant academic support, required to engage in rigorous coursework, and offered substantial interactive and preparatory activities to help them with the transition to college (Jobs for the Future, 2011; Young et al., 2010).

ECHS specific studies had similar findings. Thompson and Ongaga (2011) and Smyth and Zhang (2009) found that caring relationships with staff and counselors were

identified as important to students and their academic success. Berger et. al. (2010), Cravey (2013), and McDonald and Farrell (2012) confirmed the importance of student-teacher relationships for student success. They identified ECHS characteristics that students articulated as important to their experience. ECHSs that offered students a sense of community and identity, supported diversity, and encouraged respectfulness, productivity and accountability, had students better prepared for the academic challenges of a four-year institution environment.

The participants in the present study articulated they received similar types of support that was important to their ECHS experience, and assisted them with the transition to a four-year institution. The participants received individualized support, academic support, and transitional support. Individualized support included one-on-one teacher, counselor, and administrator interaction with the student and academic support services included tutoring and supplemental instruction. The students valued these interactions and support while they were enrolled in an ECHS. Additionally, previous studies mentioned the importance of interactive college preparatory activities (Smith & Zhang, 2009; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). Participants in this study also engaged in these types of activities through their advisory and ISM classes, as well as their internships. Students credited the latter experience with helping them gain an academic and career focus.

As previous studies mentioned, a college-going culture was critical to student success (Berger et al., 2010; Smith & Zhang, 2009). Students in the present study

confirmed the importance of a college-going culture in their transition to their current four-year institutions. Attending class on a college campus prepared them for their current institutions. They understood classroom behavior expectations, and knew of the work necessary to manage their time and complete their classwork. The participants discussed their internships, which were required of students so they could determine a course of study and career direction prior to their entrance to college. The participants in this study were aware of the expectation that they would attend college.

Research Gaps

Students valued the interaction they had with staff and revealed that a college-going culture has helped them understand academic expectations once they entered a four-year institution. However, previous studies were conducted using participants who were currently enrolled in ECHSs. By contrast, this study used participants who graduated from an ECHS and completed their first year of attendance at a four-year institution. Thus, participants in the present study were able to reflect upon their ECHS experience in the context of making the transition to a four-year institution. While the findings confirmed previous research, the current study suggested that students lacked support in areas other than academic development. This study offered a different perspective on the ECHS student experience by attempting to evaluate the social and personal adjustments students must make once in college, an area of understanding that previously received minimal focus.

FINDINGS AND TRANSITION THEORY

Schlossberg's theory of transition served as the framework for this study, and examined life changes and transitions according to how an individual perceived the transition, the characteristics of the individual's environment, and the individual (Evans et al., 2010; Schlossberg, 2011). The first part, how the student views the transition, includes if the transition was expected, unexpected, or ended up being a non-event (something that was expected to happen, but never did). The second and third parts consider the qualities and characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environments, and the qualities and characteristics of the person that may either help or hinder the person's ability to cope with change.

When examining the individual in relation to his or her transition, Schlossberg suggests that once the transition is understood by considering the individual's perception, it is important to consider factors in the environment and the qualities of the individual and how those qualities or factors effect that individual's ability to cope with change (Evans et al., 2010; Schlossberg et al, 1995; Schlossberg, 2011). Colloquially known as "The 4 Ss," these are four factors influence coping: situation, self, support, and strategies. "Situation" considers the change the individual is experiencing, including if it was anticipated, its duration and timing, and the individual's level of responsibility for the change. In the current study, the change or transition was graduating from an ECHS and transferring on to a four-year institution. The students completed their high school degrees when expected and each one knew he/she would attend a four-year institution

within months after their graduation. They described having to become more independent to manage their academic and personal lives without the ECHS support to which they had become accustomed.

The second factor, “self,” encompasses the individual’s characteristics that can either help or hinder their ability to cope with the transition they are experiencing. Participants in this study possessed a high level of self-awareness and resilience, as demonstrated through their ability to reflect on their transition to a four-year institution and to negotiate the challenges of their first year at a four-year institution.

“Support” is the third factor and includes the social and institutional support available to help an individual with a transition. The participants and ECHS staff described numerous mechanisms of support designed to aid students with their academic challenges. The students did not receive as much support for their personal and social transition to a four-year institution, and they had difficulties resolving interpersonal conflicts and issues related to self-management (e.g. time management, stress management, and procrastination).

The fourth factor, “strategies,” includes techniques to help with the transition, including modifying or controlling the changes. When participants described their academic transition, they revealed knowing how to use the campus resources demonstrated the ability to reflect upon academic challenges, so they could recalibrate their approach to challenging coursework. Some students showed the ability to assess

their social and personal difficulties and use their resources to help negotiate those challenges.

The final step in the coping process is the ability of the individual to apply what he or she has learned from previous transition experiences to future experiences. This study is not constructed to gather such longitudinal data, but it calls for consideration by future researchers to examine the long-term impact of enrollment in an ECHS on the ability to cope with transition. This is important to consider since ECHS graduates will, within a couple of years of experiencing the transition from high school to a four-year institution, experience the transition from a four-year institution to professional or graduate school, or a career at a younger age.

Implications

The findings of this study begin to call attention to the quality and breadth of research and the effectiveness of the support ECHS students received in preparation for their transition to a four-year institution. This section outlines possible directions for future, more generalizable study of ECHSs and ECHS students and offers suggestions for improving support services for these students at ECHSs and four-year institutions.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Current research on ECHSs examines student academic performance using participants who are currently enrolled in an ECHS. Students' academic performances, graduation from high school, and plans to attend a four-year institution are factors that have been used to measure the effectiveness of ECHSs. ECHS student outcomes, based

on these factors, are positive, revealing these students are more likely to attend college and be academically successful than their non-ECHS peers. However, it is not only the responsibility of the ECHS to ensure that their students perform well academically. The ECHSI emphasizes helping these students with understanding the transition they will experience once enrolled in a four-year institution and equipping students with the tools to negotiate that transition. This study begins the examination of that transition.

The study participants were prepared for most aspects of their academic transition: understanding what to expect in class and from their professors and demonstrating resilience during academic and personal challenges. However, these students struggled emotionally and socially with their transition to a four-year institution. While the types of struggles are common of students entering college, ECHS students are supposed to be provided with the experience and resources that will help them with the transition to college (Kinzie et al., 2005; Upcraft, 1989). Their preparation for and ability to cope with academic challenges is more advanced than their preparation for and ability to cope with personal and social challenges. This dissonance warrants further research to better understand students' social and personal preparation for the transition to a four-year institution and if there is a long-term emotional and developmental impact for students who complete post-secondary degrees at a younger age.

Continued research on this topic will require scholars to engage more ECHSs in research. Resistance or a lack of responsiveness from administrators occurs for any number of reasons—time, confidentiality, concern about feedback, political and

economic climate. Finding an “in” with ECHS administrators, state agencies or organizations well in advance of the start of a research project may be helpful in gaining access to sites and potential participants. Working with teachers and administrators to understand the benefits of this type of research and the potential for improving services and long-term student outcomes may also motivate school participation. For this study, the researcher interviewed staff members and administrators for information about school operations and policies. Staff and administrators expressed their concerns about tracking graduates and assessing the quality and long-term impact of their work. Each interviewee revealed a deep investment in his or her work and in the long-term educational and professional outcomes of that work for their students.

Another consideration for future research is the access to student information and lack of student tracking. Part of the challenge of finding an ECHS and students to participate was that ECHSs are not able to maintain a comprehensive database of student information. For the ECHS in this study, once students graduate, they are only able to track them through email and social media. This left a small pool of students from which to find participants. Future research projects, especially if they are longitudinal, will require a more substantial group of participants for improved generalizability of findings. Also, an improved database for tracking students may help with conducting more thorough quantitative studies and studies that compare ECHS and non-ECHS student populations. The development of an ECHS student database may serve as a better resource for this type of research.

FUTURE PRACTICE

The findings of this study reveal that, though students were mostly prepared for their academic experience once enrolled in a four-year institution, they struggled with many of the personal and social aspects of their adjustment. Further, when participants were asked to reflect upon their ECHS experience and provide feedback, some shared they would have benefited from learning more about the non-academic aspects of college life and how to cope with interpersonal issues, issues of stress and time management, procrastination, and independence and personal accountability.

Implications for practice for ECHSs center on assessing current practices to determine if they serve this population of students during their transition to a four-year institution. While at present students receive academic support and indicate an understanding of what is expected of them academically at a four-year institution, their advisory and ISM classes may need to include education and training on navigating the personal and social aspects of the transition to college. While students will not be able to understand the independence and responsibility of living away from home until they actually attend college, it may be beneficial to discuss this transition with them, and help them understand techniques for resolving and ways of responding to interpersonal challenges, including getting involved in extra-curricular activities, participating in collaborative academic work, or becoming more socially engaged on the campus of the partnering institution. The findings show that early exposure to the academic rigors of college life has helped these students with their transition to a four-year institution.

Increasing their social interactions and collaboration within the college environment may help ECHS students feel more prepared for those aspects of their adjustment.

ECHSs carry much of the responsibility in helping students with the adjustment to a four-year institution. However, based on the findings of this study, the participants did face one major issue in transition to a four-year environment: transferring coursework. As the ECHSI expands, and as accelerated educational opportunities increase, four-year institutions will see larger numbers of applicants and admits coming from these educational backgrounds. Institutions may need to identify new standards for processing their coursework and informing administrators who work with these students about their experience.

Another implication for four-year institutions is far broader should the ECHSI and accelerated education continue to expand. Students may begin their studies at a four-year institution better academically prepared, but may need services and support to help them with the non-academic, personal, and social adjustment. This is especially critical if these students have fewer years to negotiate some of the developmental milestones most college students experience. If services and practices are based on the idea that students will spend four or more years completing their degrees, then ECHS students and other recipients of an accelerated education may need a different type and pace of developmental support that will ensure they are prepared for post-graduate studies or their professional life when they graduate in two to three years of their entrance to a four-year institution.

In summary, implications for further research include conducting more developed, longitudinal quantitative and qualitative studies and managing the logistical issues of collecting student information and finding willing study participants. Developing a comprehensive database that tracks ECHS student progress may be beneficial to ECHSs for accountability measures, and researching the ECHS student experience for students' academic, personal and professional outcomes. In addition, the findings of this study suggest ECHSs may need to explore ways to better prepare students for social and personal challenges by incorporating training on these aspects of their adjustment in their curriculum and increasing requirements for extra-curricular participation on the campus of their partnering institution.

Four-year institutions share the responsibility of helping students with their transition, and may need to better understand the experience of students who use accelerated education to complete their post-secondary educations more quickly. Support service staff and administrators with an improved understanding of this unique academic experience and may be able to provide better advising and develop better policies that do not penalize this type of student. As well, four-year institutions may need to consider the experience of these students in the context of developmental, involvement, and learning theories that inform practices, policies, and procedures. These students will complete their degrees in less time, and will have less time to face and resolve the developmental challenges that will prepare them for life after graduation. Practitioners and institutions

may soon need to recalibrate their practices to respond to the increasing number of students who only spend two to three years earning their college degrees.

SUMMARY

The discussion of the findings and implications in this chapter synthesize the findings of this study in the context of the current ECHS literature and transition theory framework, and use the findings to inform future research directions on the ECHS student experience and future practices to support ECHS students and participants in accelerated education. Ultimately, these participants were helped and supported in their academic transition to a four-year institution. Access to academic support, transitional support, and individualized support helped students understand some of the academic challenges they experience once they entered a four-year institution. Unfortunately, the participants lacked the support and education they needed to adjust to the personal and social transition to four-year institutions. While most of them eventually resolved their personal and interpersonal issues, they did not expect to face these kinds of challenges. Updating practices to help students better face the adjustment to a four-year institution and expanding research and resources to inform these practices may contribute to students' long-term success and understanding the overall effectiveness of ECHSs.

Appendix A: Preliminary Questionnaire

This confidential questionnaire is part of a study to learn more about the transition from high school to college. Please answer each question to the best of your ability and provide details where possible. Complete this and email it back to Krystal in a Word document at kp1097@yahoo.com. You have a week to complete this questionnaire.

Name (Last, First):

High School GPA:

College Credit Earned in High School (in hours):

Fall 2013 Hours Attempted:

Fall 2013 Hours Completed:

Fall 2013 GPA:

Spring 2014 Hours Attempted:

Spring 2014 Hours Completed:

Spring 2014 GPA:

2013-2014 Cumulative GPA:

Fall 2014 Hours Enrolled:

1. What services and programs did your high school provide to help you with your classwork?
2. How did you learn about college (general information, applying, attending, etc.)?
3. How is high school similar to college? How is it different?
4. In what ways did you feel prepared for college?

5. Are there things you wish you had known before starting college?
6. List some of your biggest stressors since starting college.
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix B: Interview #1 Protocol

1. When you were in high school, what were some of the services and programs available to help you with your classwork?
2. If you used any of these services or programs, how were they helpful? If you did not use these services or programs, did you seek assistance from anywhere or anybody else?
3. How do high school and college differ? How are they the same?
4. How does your social environment compare between high school and college?
5. What are some of the biggest changes you experienced from high school to college?
6. Which of these changes was the easiest, and which was the most challenging?
What changes or challenges were expected/unexpected?
7. Have you used any on-campus services to help you with any challenges or changes?
8. Is there anything you learned in high school that helped you deal with the challenges of college?
9. Is there anything you wish you had known before starting college that would have helped you with the changes you've experienced?

Appendix C: Interview #2 Protocol

1. What would you consider to be your biggest challenge from your first semester of college? What is your biggest accomplishment?
2. What did you expect about your first semester of college? What about your first semester did you not expect?
3. Please identify some of the most important aspects of the support you received while in high school (e.g. people, documents, activities, etc.).
4. If you have used any on-campus support services while in college, how do those services compare to what you used in high school?
5. What recommendations can you give to your high school that would improve your transition to college?
6. What recommendations would you give to your college to help with your transition?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix D: ECHS Staff Interview Protocol

1. What is your role and your current responsibilities?
2. Please describe the typical daily schedule of students enrolled here.
3. What programs and practices in place are devoted to preparing students for graduation and subsequent enrollment at a four-year college or university, and especially during their final year?
4. Please describe any social and/or extracurricular opportunities that are provided to the students while enrolled here. Please describe the level of student engagement in these opportunities.
5. What programming is provided for the parents of these students? Please describe the level of parent participation in these programs.
6. How are these opportunities for engagement advertised to students?
7. If you have continued contact with Spring 2013 graduates, would you provide names and contact information for these graduates?
8. Please share any additional information you think would be relevant to this study.

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